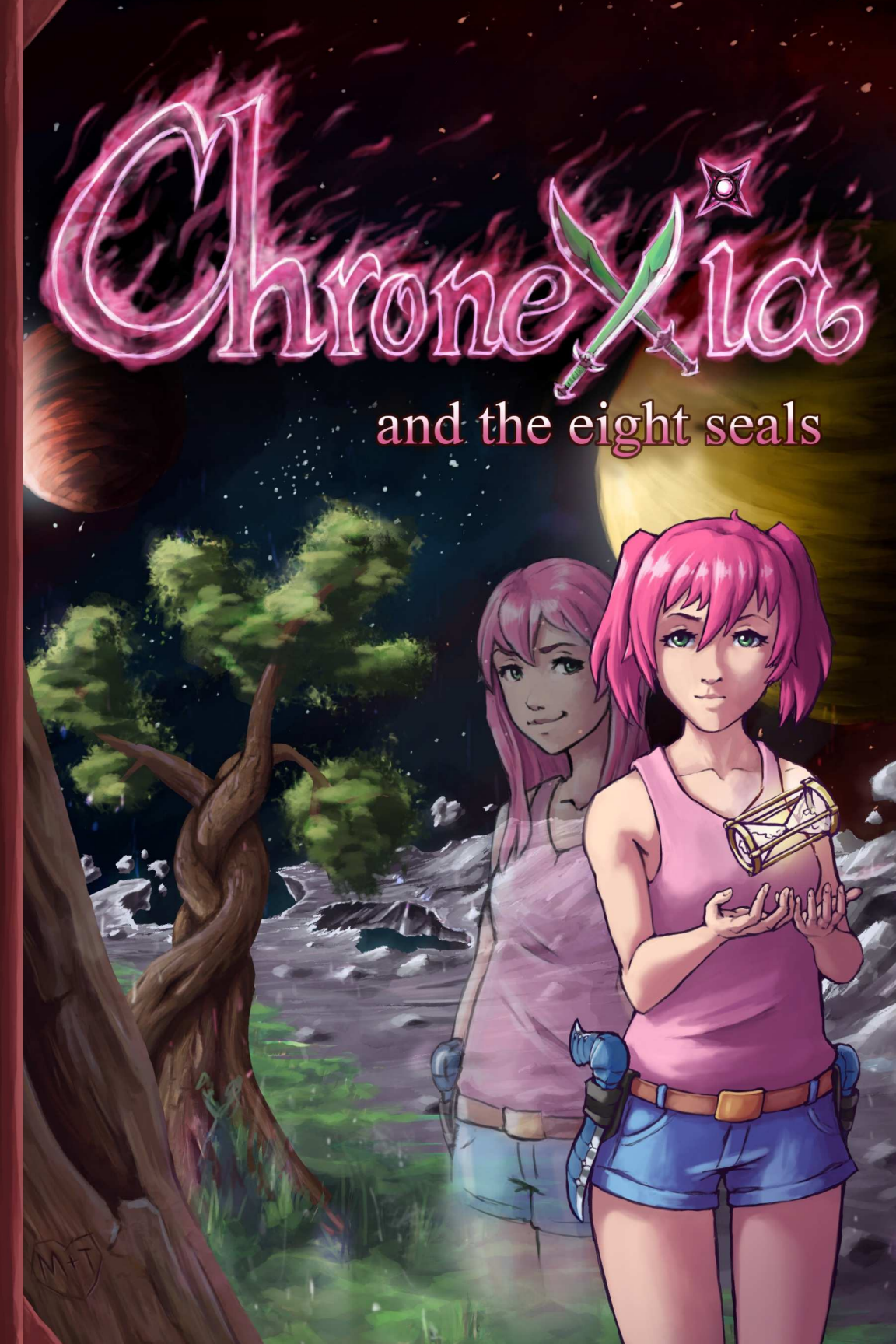
Chronexia
and the eight seals

Original title: *Chronexia et les huit sceaux*

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Cover illustration: Fabian Frédéric Donner
Map: Samuel Surprenant
Book Layout: Jessica Bruhmuller
Translation: Gabriel Lauzier-Proulx & Réjane Lerat
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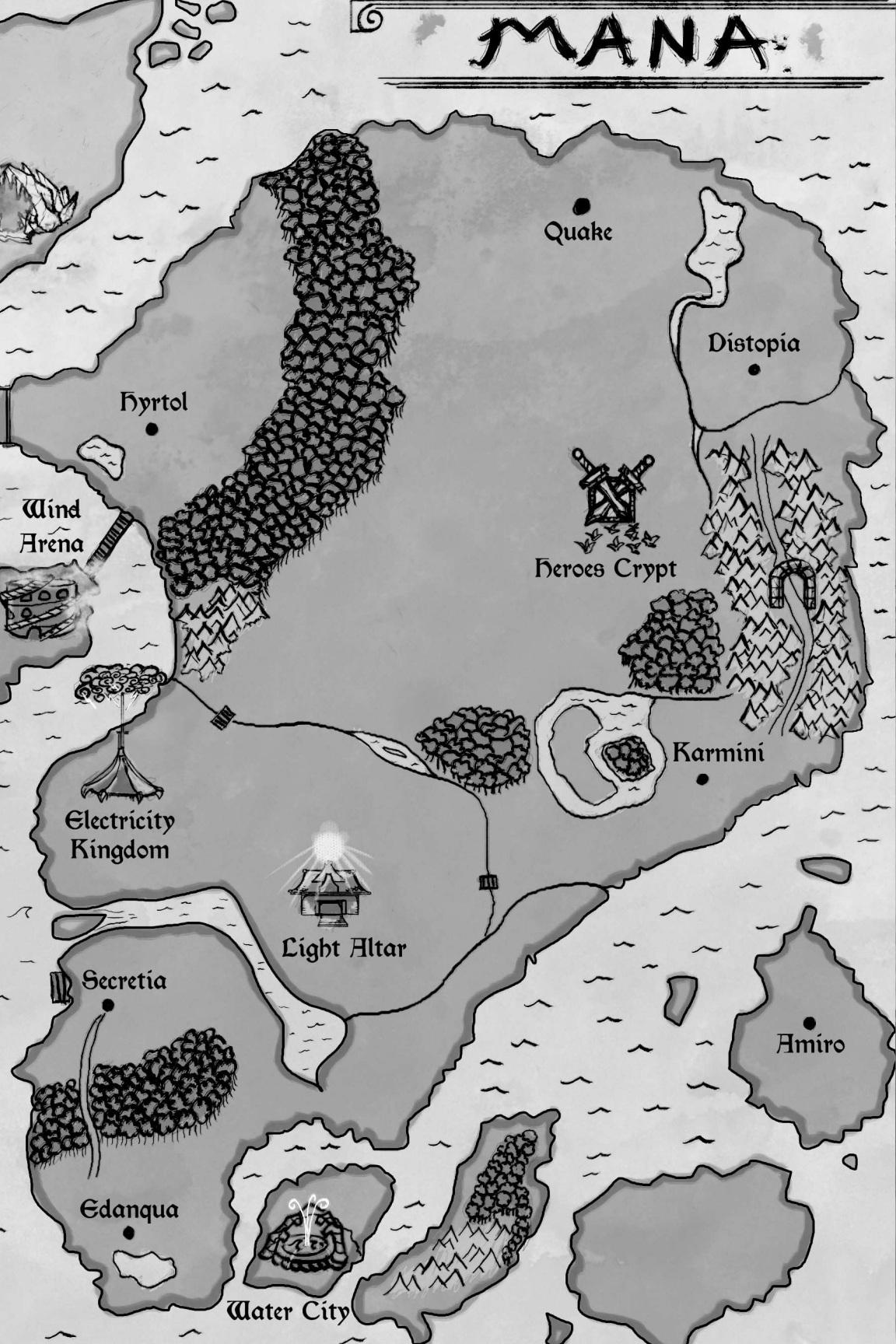
Chronexia

and the Eight Seals

Mathieu Brunelle

Earth Temple
Ricena
Ice Catacombs
Gardia
Arenight
Sphere
of
Life
Darkness
Sanctuary
Deragross
Tamber
Terfie
Fire Ruins
Porttow
Cameron Price


MANA
Quake
Distopia
Hyrtol
Wind
Arena
Heroes Crypt
Karmini
Electricity
Kingdom
Light Altar
Secretia
Amiro
Edanqua
Water City

"You don't have to be the smartest or the most skillful in something, but if you're passionate, with willpower and tenacity, you can achieve anything... It's only a matter of time."

Prologue:
In Memoria

"22nd day of the 10th month of the year 856

I am writing these memoires in hopes of helping Professor Flora. My name is Achille Watson. Out of courtesy, I'll present myself: I am a 21 years old and am considered like the leader of Mana's Elite. Mana is our planet's name. Since these memoires are meant to be sent in space, I thought it would be important to mention that.

This Elite, formed of nine members, has been created to protect our planet. In some way, we are its guardians. Dyol Hendji, Aleck Watson, Flora and Maxim Sprinkle, Krissy Blackbird, Socrate Crescent, Suling Anezaki and Mack Starz are the eight other members along myself. We were hired by the government in order to protect the planet and its core: the Sphere of Life. Our entire lives are based solely on fighting to bestow order. If this optic does not suit your people, feel free to leave these pages where you found them.

Back to these memoires, they will be used for a governmental project, which consists in sending an experimental capsule in a dimensional breach managed by the Professor Flora. My task is to list the major occurrences that have and will take place on Mana in the following years and to ease your understanding of them.

First of all, I wish to inform you on the composition of Mana and its inhabitants. The planet is supported by eight elemental seals. According to the Professor, a ninth seal would have once existed, but it has now vanished from the face of the world. The eight elements are: fire, wind, water, earth,

electricity, ice, light and darkness.

The population is divided in four main races: humans, elves, demons and gods. You already know gods, since they have the ability to travel from a world to another.

Humans are beings with no particular characteristics. They can wield all kinds of tools and adapt quickly to new technologies.

Elves are known for their intelligence and their offensive magic and healing powers. Physically, they usually harbour light hair, which makes them easily recognizable. They also live for several hundred years. As for Professor Flora, she is a silver haired elf. Thanks to her high intelligence, we were able to make many scientific discoveries.

And finally, there's demons; monsters for the most: bloodthirsty, barbaric, and immoral. They spread chaos throughout Mana, and are the reason why the Elite was created.

Sometimes, however, it happens that our opponents are not demons. Recently, a character presented himself to us as Vince, an half-elf - whose parents are a human and an elf - and he intends to take over the Sphere of Life. Frankly, he is one of the most powerful opponents we have faced so far. He has disappeared, but my father, Aleck, is taking care of tracking him.

These memoires are used to gather data for those who will find them. Make good use of it."

In a room made entirely of round wood, a red head leaned over the writer's shoulder. Two braids fell down on each side of her neck.

"Memoirs doesn't take an E at the end. What are they going to think if they see we make so many spelling mistakes?"

"That we have horrible schools?" claimed Achille. "Could you proofread it? Please, Dyol."

"Fine. Come on, hand it over," said the woman while pulling her

hand towards the piece of paper.

“Thanks, I love you.”

Achille took the paper from the small desk and handed it to her. Dyol grabbed it and brought it to the main table of the house. They knew each other since forever and had finally confessed their love for each other during a recent mission.

In retrospect, Achille found himself stupid not to have seen anything sooner. But it didn't matter now, they were together, doing what they loved and everything was for the better.

Someone banged at the door; the knocks were harsh, quick, and loud. Dyol frowned to concentrate harder on her boyfriend’s memoirs while Achille walked toward the door. He passed near the staircase and stepped over an overturned chair. He slowed down his pace when his brown eyes met his reflection in a mirror.

It was a small square mirror of about thirty centimetres, which was framed with carved cherry wood, a rare material, but oh so enjoyable to look at.

Out of habit, Achille made sure his brown hair was properly styled. He puckered up at the sight of his hair, flattened by sebum. With quick finger play, he tousled his hair as much as he could. He had a reputation to maintain towards the other members of the Elite. And everybody knew the importance of a person in a group was proportional to the level of fluff in one's hair. It was a cliché to respect.

The knocks resonated with more impact. While walking, Achille tried to stay in front of the mirror as long as he could, but the more steps he took, the more his back bent, and the more ridiculous he looked. Now bent like a contortionist, he abandoned his shiny object and rushed to the door.

It was dark outside and to make things worse, it was raining. The visibility was poor, but the light coming from the inside of the house helped Achille recognize his father, hair tousled like his, but soaked. At the doorstep,

Aleck's outfit dripped as much as his brown hair. His violet velvet pants were so wet they turned as dark as his leather cape. Only his red scarf flapping in the wind stood out in the dark.

Hanging on his hip was a sword with an emerald blade. Usually, anyone seeing someone carrying such a weapon on their doorstep would have panicked and slammed the door shut, but on Mana, Mercenaries such as Aleck were quite common. And for an Elite member, not bearing a weapon, unless they could fight barehanded like Socrate and Krissy, was a big lack of clairvoyance. Even Flora, recently married to Aleck, kept a staff at all times to protect herself during the missions, despite her main role being the one of a healer.

Without skipping a beat, Aleck let himself in the house of his son, and shook his head as if he had a chill. Dyol took her gaze away for the memoir and looked toward her father-in-law.

“What's going on?” asked Achille.

“We found Vince,” calmly said Aleck.

“Really! Where is he?”

“He's on his way to destroy the Sphere of Life.”

“Isn't Mana there?” inquired Dyol. “She could hold him off.”

“Mana? The Goddess of Energy? She's a goddess, we don't know how she'll react.”

“How are we going to get there?” pressed Achille.

“The government sent us blackbirds. I came to get you guys, everyone is already on its way.”

Achille muffled a blasphemy. He ran to the wardrobe, and opened it. Inside, was a blue and red fighting outfit and a set of twin blades. Dyol had already changed in a brown leather skirt, a white bib and long boots matching her skirt. The ensemble made her look like a maid, but her steel armoured suit was primarily a distraction. As weapons, she wore a dagger filled belt that shecould throw with deadly accuracy. To complete her outfit,

she was wearing a horned helmet on her head.

Achille finished dressing up, and ran out under the rain followed by his father and Dyol. He lived in a dead-end, with only one neighbouring house. In that house, a man glared at them before closing his window's curtains on the three soldiers, but they didn't seem to notice him. And even if they did, they didn't have time to worry about it. They had to go to the west side of the city, where they could join the blackbirds in the town square.

"Why are we always the last ones to know about these things?" asked Achille.

"Tamber is the farthest town, move closer if that bothers you so much."

Turning the corner of a street, they arrived in front of two five meters birds. The animals were saddled for humans to ride them. Looking closer, Achille couldn't help but think they looked like huge ravens under this heavy rain. But the irony was in the fact that the birds were named after the colour black, yet one was navy and the second was of a crimson red.

Once mounted, they took off with a piercing hoot. On the public square, villagers of Tamber came out in the rain to encourage the Elite and to sneak a peek at the blackbirds.

The Sphere of Life was more than 250 kilometres from Tamber. Best case scenario, they could be there in a little over 30 minutes. After 10 minutes of flight, they got out of the raincloud that stood on the south-west part of the continent. During the whole trip, Achille worried about his companions and hoped they didn't encounter any major difficulties. And, as if it reassured him, he remembered the abilities of each of his party member. Flora was specialized in support magic, while her half-brother Maxim was an expert in offensive magic. Together, they could hold off Vince, and heal the wounded while waiting for reinforcements.

No, Achille was more worried about Krissy, Suling and Mack that all fought in close quarters. Krissy with her armoured fists, Suling with cards

infused with elemental magic, and Mack, who was very pretentious, with a curved sword. His supposedly noble blood often rose to his head and created a lot of arguments with Suling and Achille. Mack didn't like the fact he was the last to join the Elite.

Socrate? No, Socrate must have been the strongest member of their team. He fought with bare hands, but in his martial art style, he had learned to generate plasmic rays in exchange for a small amount of vital energy. These rays were quite devastating for those who were careless.

After an endless wait, the Sphere of Life appeared at the horizon. It was a gigantic blue sphere made out of pure energy. The planet’s engine as they called it. Its destruction would cause the world's end.

The blackbirds landed in retreat, and the trio sprinted to the battle scene. Upon their arrival, what they found was worse than what Achille could have imagined. His companions had almost all been knocked out. Only Socrate and a woman Achille had never seen before were still up and about.

Flora was unconscious due to exhaustion, just like her half-brother. As a 16 year old, he didn't have Flora's endurance, who was twice his age. Krissy had collapsed, the fracture in her right leg prevented her to get back up, but at least she was still conscious.

Achille always wondered how two 16 years old ended up being part of the elite, but the kings' decision was final and unwavering. It was inhuman, but both cadets had a will of steel, and rarely let themselves be mistreated that way.

On his left, Mack was crawling trying to get back up. He wanted to reach Suling, but didn't get that opportunity. In front of him stood a man with a childish face. He had short blond hair, and was wearing a white toga barely soiled by dirt and the blood of his foes. He held in his hands a sword and a shield worn out by time.

He kicked the noble in his flank repeatedly. The man seemed very amused. He grabbed Mack's dark hair, and forced him to look at Suling.

“After you, it's her turn.”

Suling turned her head towards them, knowing she was the one mentioned. In her black ninja outfit, she took out the first card she could put her hands on. She glanced at it with her slanted eyes, and faintly said:

“Fire card…”

A ball of fire emerged from the centre of the card. The tiny sun dashed for the blondie, who easily sent it up in the sky with his shield.

“No such luck,” he sympathized. “You guys are pathetic. Protectors of the planet? That's so sad…”

“Die…” mumbled Mack.

“Make me!”

Still holding Mack by his hair, he gave him a powerful kick to the head that sent him flying.

“*Where are you, Achille?*” thought Mack.

Instead of hitting the ground, he was caught mid-flight by someone. Upon opening his eyes, he saw the snarly face of his leader, looking away.

“Sorry Mack, I'm late.”

Mack muffled an amused chuckle.

“You couldn't resist the pretentious entrance, couldn't you?”

“It makes my whole style, right?” smiled Achille.

He put Mack down, and spoke to Dyol.

“Take care of them, Aleck and I will get rid of him.”

The mercenary closed in toward Socrate and a woman. Seeing her for the first time, he wondered who she was.

“She's my wife. She was with me when I received the information. She followed us in the King's teleportation device. Since the beginning of the fight, I've been protecting her, waiting for your arrival with the blackbirds.”

“We left them at the border of the forest, south of here. She can walk there, while we hold him off.”

“But… What about you?” worried the woman.

“Don't worry Michelle, it'll be easier for us if you are at a safe distance.”

She glanced back and forth at Aleck and Socrate, her blond hair in the wind, then complied. She ran south, letting them focus on Vince, who had disappeared. A shriek behind them made their blood freeze to subzero.

Aleck, Socrate, and Achille turned around to see Vince holding the blond girl by the throat, his sword pointed at her heart. Lifting her off the ground with his brute force, Vince dragged her toward the core. He moved slowly yet assertively, while Socrate was panicking.

“Let her go!” he sheepishly said. “She has nothing do to with this!”

“Oh quite the opposite, my good friend,” said Vince, amused. “You see, you're here to stop me. Unfortunately, I have my ideals and I'd like to abide by them. And to do so, I must eliminate you. One... after... the other.”

He finished his sentence by spacing every word. He was looking in Socrate's eyes, as if he could taste every drop of despair in him. In a slow movement, following the rhythm of his last sentence, he pierced the screaming woman body.

“NO! MICHELLE!”

A triumphant smile dawned on Vince's face. When the corpse stopped moving, he tossed it on the ground with a disgusted groan. He had no need for it anymore. Socrate threw himself at his wife. She couldn't be dead, that was impossible.

Vince turned toward the Sphere of Life, and took a few steps. He then looked back, sensing danger approaching. His reflexes saved him. Achille charged at the half-elf at an inhuman speed. His body was glowing in a golden aura. A killer determination could be read in his eyes.

“You piece of trash!”

Nearly face to face with the murderer, Achille put all his strength in his swords trying to push back the shield that was protecting him. Vince's sword had a perfect opening to make a second victim. Taking advantage of this opportunity, he wanted to stab the leader in the side, when an emerald

sword crossed his path.

“Do it, Socrate!”

But the man only had eyes for his deceased wife. How could he do such a thing? A poor defenceless woman trying to escape. Of all the elite members present, he chose the only civilian. That man... No, that monster needed to die.

Achille and Aleck were still holding their opponent down. Wanting to free himself, Vince tried to kick the leader in the chest, but a dagger flew in the sole of his boot. Followed by two other, one piercing his hip, and the second, his foot still on the ground. Achille’s strength destabilized Vince and sent him flying. Now vulnerable, Aleck and Achille took their chance. Aleck bounced, and in a green flash, slashed the torso of the murderer.

Before he could hit the ground, Achille jumped on the back of his father, and propelled himself high enough to overcast the half-elf. A golden meteorite dashed towards Vince, and went through him. Achille landed with dexterity.

Vince arched his back, still flying in the air. A gush of blood left his mouth, and three cuts appeared on his chest simultaneously. The strength of the impact sent him straight in the Sphere of Life.

The body, killed by Achille's and his father's attack, sizzled a moment before disappearing, absorbed by the Sphere of Life. A strong stench of burnt flesh spread throughout the field, before dissipating in the night. The Sphere of Life flickered and a silhouette that didn’t look like Vince at all came out of it. It was ladylike, with hair brown like bark and Amazonian leather mixed with a white toga. It was a strange combination. The woman seemed very tired, as if she had just been woken up from a deep slumber.

“Mana!” cried Achille. “You're a Goddess. Can't you revive our friend?”

“I'm sorry, even Gods don't have the privilege of bringing back the dead. Every one of us reigns over an element. Mine is Energy. Even if I'd fill

her body with plasmic energy, that wouldn't make her alive again."

Without another word, she re-entered her sphere. Some could say she was being selfish, but gods were confined to a certain role. They couldn't do more than the element they governed. Knowing she was of no help, she had no reason to stay.

Socrate continued crying. Why didn't he escort her to the blackbirds? She'd still be alive if he had done so. It was all his fault. The fact that she followed him, that Vince took her hostage, that she was now dead, everything!

Achille walked toward Socrate and put his hand on his shoulder, but the man pushed it back angrily. He didn't want their sympathy. That wouldn't bring Michelle back and knowing they felt sorry for him just made things worse. He wanted to go home. Go home with her on their island, Amiro. Without asking anyone's permission, he grabbed a blackbird, and flew to the east.

This team was lame. Elite of the world? Pfft, they couldn't even save the life of one person. How could they call themselves the World's defenders? Achille stared at the blackbird disappearing in the distance. Dyol joined him.

"How are the others?" he asked.

"Flora and Maxim should wake up any minute now. Krissy and Mack need treatments quickly, but their lives are not in danger. As for Suling, she's just exhausted. Aleck just left for the hospital in Arenight with Krissy and Mack. He'll bring back two blackbirds so we can go home. All we need is to wait for him to return."

Achille stared at the blackbird disappearing in the distance. Dyol joined him.

"How are the others?" he asked.

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Mack. He'll bring back two blackbirds so we can go home. All we need is to wait for him to return."

For once, no one in the team was talking. That evening put everyone in a gloomy mood. Achille just wanted to go back home and go to bed. But since he promised Flora, he would have to cover today's events in his memoirs.

Waiting for his father to be back, Achille laid down in the grass and looked at the starry sky. Aleck arrived about an hour later.

"Sorry for the wait, I had to take care of formalities, and report what happened tonight to the government."

"Whatever," his son cut. "Let's go. I've had enough for tonight. Can you take care of Flora and Max?"

Aleck nodded. Suling, who was feeling slightly better, climbed on the purple steed and flew to her village, Secretia. Achille hoisted himself on the white bird and left for Tamber with Dyol, leaving Aleck with the two still unconcious.

Chapter 1:
New Generation

"29th day of the 5th month of the year 881

Sorry for being late, almost a year now since my last entry in this journal, but there was no significant event since the day I found the Hazblade. Flora has studied them recently and has authorized me to take them back. She came up with the following conclusion: they are simple spheres that can transform in sharp swords." I think I'll give them as a gift to my son for his 17th birthday that was last month. It's a little late but I'm confident he'll be delighted. New weapons will surely make him happy. I feel a little guilty to always have to leave on short notice to make some new research for the Professor and my son, but he seems to have gotten used to it. In any case Tom spends all his time with the neighbour and his aunt."

"I'm leaving, dad," said a voice.

Achille barely had time to turn to see his son, that he was already gone. He brought with him two rusty swords which were manifestly worn out with years of practice.

"It's almost good to be back," said Achille, thinking out loud.

Outside, Tom closed the door behind him. He couldn't resist but admire the scenic view that was surrounding him. His wooden house was withdrawn from the town and had only one neighbouring house. He knew the owners fairly well: his best friend since an early age, her father – who hated him for some reason – and her mother, who was totally submissive to her husband.

In the sky, the sun was rising. Tom estimated that it was

approximately seven thirty. They had half an hour to reach the school in Tamber. Passing in front of the windows of his house, Tom saw his mom kissing his father. He frowned and adjusted his focus in order to see his own reflection in the glass.

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His hair complimented his eyes, both the same shade of brown. Unfortunately, it didn't bring much attention from the opposite sex. He couldn't care less about that anyway. His goal was to become the best swordsman that ever existed. And if he didn't care about other girls, it was principally because…

Without even realizing it, Tom had crossed the sandy and dusty small street, and had advanced up to the front porch. A man in his forties opened the door. Like every morning, he looked at Tom coldly and with disdain. The man was blond and somewhat well built, not enough to impress Tom though. It was a fairly normal body shape for the population of Tamber. Tom stepped forward and repeated the same sentence as every other day.

"I'm Misty's ride."

"I bet you'd like that…" mumbled the man.

"Sorry?"staggered Tom.

A girl's head popped outside, just between him and the man. Tom

looked at her hair for half a second. The color was unique. Her red hair, tied up in pigtails above her ears, had a natural candy pink tint in it. Obviously, with such a hair color, it was inevitable that she'd make heads turn. Especially since she got rid of those thick glasses.

"I'm coming," she happily said.

She put on her small blue shoes with white laces and went out. Like Tom, who was carrying two sheathed swords at his hips, Misty had two blue metal boomerangs. She didn't really liked to fight, but those weapons were more for defense, and an excuse to share the same passion as her friend. Now that they were on route to school, the conversation was becoming livelier.

"This will be the last time that we will be picking her up." said Tom.

"Yeah, it's really sad that she's moving."

"Don't worry, Terfie is not that far from here. The commute should be easy."

"I hope you're right," she sighed.

They stopped just in front of a white picket fence circling the house. Inside, a yellow curtain waved and a few seconds later, a young fourteen year old girl came out. Just like Misty, the hair of the teenager was explosively unique. Her hair was of a flashy silver color and was tied up just like Misty's, except slightly higher.

Tom knew that having parents like Aleck and Flora, she would inherit half-elf blood and her hair color would be the result of that mix.

"Yo Noemi," greeted Tom. "Your mom isn't coming with us today?"

The girl shook her head negatively, but maintained her smile.

"No, she already left for school. She wanted to put some order in her books."

Tom crossed his arm behind his neck and continued his way to school. Behind him, Noemi and Misty were talking about a homework that was due for this morning. He sighed. His friends became preoccupied about his behaviour.

“Every day is the same boring crap. We go to class, we train and we all go home separately. This routine is annoying me, and my level of swordsmanship is not improving without a proper opponent.”

Misty and Noemi had no clue what to reply, but tried something nonetheless.

“Your dad came back, maybe you could train with him,” suggested Misty.

“Yeah, but he never stays home very long.”

“How about my dad?” asked Noemi.

“Grandpa is moving Saturday, it’s no use.” the other two.

Far away, the school bell rang signalling the start of class. They hurried up, entered the building and took their regular places: Tom in the middle, Misty in the seat on his left and Noemi in the back right corner. The room was completely made of wood and had a black board behind the teacher’s desk. On the floor there was two lines: when the sun crossed the first, it meant that the morning was over; the second was for the end of the day.

Tom wondered how his teacher was able to do as much as she did with so little time. She was extremely intelligent, but writing scientific reports, finding new remedies, preparing classes, studying the different artifacts that Achilles was bringing to her and overlooking her inter-dimensional project, all completed within the same day… Tom would have hung himself long ago.

Flora came out from her storage room and walked in front of the class. After all these years, Tom never noticed any difference in her physical appearance, while his mom had taken on some wiser traits. This was clearly due to her blood, but for Dyol this was really annoying.

“Since my leave had been planned for the past month, I have the pleasure to announce that today will be our last day of class.”

“A month earlier, awesome!” exclaimed Tom.

Flora rose her eyes above her glasses. Tom immediately sat back in his chair to let her continue.

“It also means that all the 10th graders need to pass their DUELS.”

“Ah! A fight!” smiled Tom. “Just when I was complaining.”

Misty frowned in front of such flagrant ignorance. Not knowing what the DUELS were after failing a year was typically…Tomish.

“Diploma Unified for Establishing Legitimate Studies. It’s a written exam about the general knowledge acquired throughout the ten years of studies,” she replied. “I knew it would be at the end of classes, but I wasn’t expecting it so soon…”

“What is this shi…”

Tom stopped his sentenced in his sleeve. The truth was, he didn’t study anything and Flora was already distributing the papers. He would need all day to work on his.

“So! Let’s start by the easy questions. I’ll come back for the harder ones at the end,” sang Tom.

Misty on his left, drew her blue glasses from her desk. She adjusted them on her nose and in a blink, she passed from cute to strange. This accessory wasn’t really enhancing her features, but it did allowed her to read small characters.

“Good luck,” she told him.

“Thank, I’ll need it,” whined Tom. “Good luck to you.”

“No need, I have memorized everything. And it shouldn’t be so hard, even Noemi's doing it.”

Tom felt a shiver in his spine. His fourteen year old aunt was also attempting the DUELS exam? It was true t hat anyone could try it, and that anyone who would pass the exam was exempted of class for the rest of their life. But to succeed, it required a numerous amount of general knowledge, and the passing note in every category: mathematics, medicine,

botanic, science, history, language, philosophy and astronomy.

Tom was good with language and philosophy, but for the others, which actually required studies, he was terrible. As for Misty, she was the complete opposite. She excelled in every fields, but via studying, while Noemi was simply a genius.

Within two hours, Tom had finished his two essays. He was confident to pass them until he saw the mathematics questions and his confidence broke apart. Vectors? Statistics? Trigonometry? Had they even learnt that?

Not only Tom was unable to figure out the resolution methods, but he couldn't even remember hearing those words before. Wishing that his memory would come back to him, he adventured himself to the science category, luckily he discovered a series of true or false questions.

"Is there multiple races existing amongst the living?" read Tom.

"True. Noemi is the proof." Tom dipped his nib in the ink and checked the affirmative box.

"Some people have the capacity of feeling the presence of other in their surroundings" continued Tom.

"*I suppose…"* He didn't know the answer, but took a chance and checked true again. Tom continued in the category of science until the section where he had to fill it with text.

"How do we call the power which inhabit our bodies and what is its official name?"

Tom rolled his eyes. He tilted his head in a way that Flora wouldn't see him and took a gander at Misty's copy.

More practical than Tom, she chose to answer the question in order. The luck wished by Misty just appeared in front of him: she was at the same page.

Tom faked to be thinking for a minute and waited for Misty to write her answer. Once she moved her arm away, Tom sneaked a look. Her writing

was easily readable and excessively well-spaced. Tom couldn't have dreamt better.

"The familiar name is mana and comes from the Goddess of Energy located in Arenight. The official name, rarely mentioned, is plasma. Those two terms are used by people able to read the power level of living organisms. A capacity which can be developed with a physical change or following psychological traumas. This power level is calculated in thousands, but can vary according to multiple factors, like a Fae for example."

Tom realized that Misty was actually holding the sheet for him to read it. Tom looked at her with a cold look which explicitly meant: *"you're putting way too much."* Misty shrugged with carelessness: *"better more than too little."* Tom gave her a wink to thank her and she changed page. After spending the last ten years together, Tom and Misty became professionals in the art of communicating without a single word.

"Ouch!" she winced.

Tom turned his head towards her, she was looking at her bleeding finger. A drop fell and splatted her exam copy.

"Paper cut," she said, awkwardly.

Tom shook his head at such clumsiness. Misty took her finger to her mouth. From the shivering of her eyelid to the expression on her face, he could guess that the cut was burning. Tom gave her a bandage that was in his pocket. Since he was fighting every day, he couldn't do otherwise than to carry a first aid kit in case of slip-ups. She granted him one of her nicest smile and he blushingly returned to his exam.

Behind them, a chair cracked against the old wooden floor. Someone was hitting their document against their desk and walked heavily towards Flora. It was the usual sounds of the first person who finished their exam before everyone else and who wished to be noticed. Tom didn't dare to look up. From the corner of his eyes, he saw a silver head skipping towards her

mother. She put her exam on her desk and advanced towards the door.

While her daughter was handing in her copy, Flora didn't raise an eye from her book. In the distance, Tom could only see part of the title "Known gods…" His attention was redirected towards Noemi. She was now out of sight from her mom and was making signs for Tom and Misty.

She pointed at herself, moving exaggeratedly her lips to express every words.

"I'm…," was mentally translating Tom.

She imitated hitting the exam against the desk, and then pointed to herself again.

"…finished. I'm…"

She drew a big half-circle with her indexes and pointed towards the exit. From her lips, Tom read *"going"*. She finished by drawing with her hand one of the simplest houses Tom could imagine: a square with a triangle above to serve as a roof. Tom replied by quick and annoyed nods. He looked at the sun through the window, it was eleven thirty.

How could she do an eight hour long exam in only three and half hours, when he barely finished half of it?

Misty had already completed all the hard categories and it wasn't even noon. When the sun reached the first line, Flora offered the students to stay and continue the exam or to go have lunch. Misty took this opportunity to go out under the sun of the 5th month, but Tom didn't allow himself such luxury.

He turned the pages searching for an easy question, but he couldn't find any to his taste. He answered a few true or false questions with uncertainty and leaned his elbow on the desk. He let his chin rest in his palm and closed his eyes for a few seconds… a few minutes…

***

The room was plunged in complete darkness. His temples were beating violently. His leg, just like his back, was in awful pain and he was

covered in many heavily bleeding cuts. His thoughts were unbearable, haunting him. Screams, blurred images and feelings that he, up to this day, had never experienced. A dragon, a kid with a burning mane, a grown woman with silver hair, a room full of water, another full of lava, an empty corridorand a shining blue crystal were speeding through his mind.

On all fours on a floor made of grey rocks, he was crying. From pain? Sadness? Rage? Culpability? He had no clue, but he couldn't stop himself. An undefined shape appeared in the darkness, but he couldn't care less. Everyone was depending on him and he failed them. A resounding noise and a cold voice could be heard, echoing in the room.

"Who would have believed this, Tom?" said the voice.

Tom shook his head. He tried to get rid of this troubling sensation. Who was talking to him? Who knew him like that? Who would wish such evil upon him? He was so dizzy that he couldn't even distinguish if this person was a male or a female.

The pain was atrocious. The feelings were horrible. Tom never wished to die, but at this very instant, it's all he wanted.

"Who are you?" panted Tom.

"My identity is useless to you. The only thing you need to know is that you have to die by my hands."

"What did I do to you?"

"Nothing really. You are simply a target to eliminate."

"You won't get me so easily," spat Tom.

"In your current state, and your three thousand manas, I think I will. Open your eyes. What is awaiting you is a sure death… this is un-de-ni-a-ble," whispered the person in his ear. "This scene is not ordinary, but precise. It goes up to your death."

Tom could feel it. The shivering which announced the end. In the darkness, a hissing noise could be heard. Tom continued to cry. He wanted to get up, roll or even push his opponent away, but he could only move his head.

“Dad, Mom, Misty… I'm sorry!”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed the shadow.

Tom was paralysed with fear. That laugh… A whistling sound resonated and a blade penetrated his back. The tip of the sword went through his chest after piercing his heart. Tom, without life, slowly fell. His jaw crashed against the rocks, but no pain was felt. He was already dead.

***

“Tom!” hissed Misty through her teeth.

Tom woke up suddenly. Misty had knocked him on the forearm. His head hit his exam placed horizontally. He bounced back and replaced himself. Tom gave Misty a wrathful look who nudged him a sign to look behind him.

Flora was standing beside him with the same stern look that she so often gave him.

“I’m picking up the exams Tommy.”

Tom looked around him. The sun had just passed the five o’clock line.

“But I’m not done,” he protested while putting his hand on the exam trying to protect it.

Seeing that her authority was contested, Flora got even madder. She raised the tone of her voice in front of her rebel student.

“Watson, this is an order! Give me back this exam. Immediately!”

Tom's face changed in a pout. He gave her the pile of papers and Flora resumed the harvest. She returned to Misty who gave hers without any hesitation. Flora stared her for a moment and gave her a slight sign of reprehension.

Gloomier than when he arrived, Tom picked his belonging from his desk and put everything in a bag pack. Misty did the same, removing her glasses and they both got out while the sun was setting.

“What took you so long?” asked Tom. “You were almost done at

noon."

"I tripped on astronomy," she lied. "And I wanted to review it."

"Bah, if you stayed, why didn't you wake me up?"

"You were sleeping?" she said innocently. "Seems like you write in your sleep then. You haven't stopped since you took that break."

"Really?" he replied skeptically.

"You still have ink on your fingers," she noted.

Tom looked at his fingers and gave in to the facts, even if he found all of it strange. This dream might have been really unpleasant but it was a productive one. If he had slept in most of his classes, then his subconscious was the most adequate to answer all those questions.

"... Can't wait to see my score," he thought out loud. "Since it's too late for a regular training, wanna ambush my dad? He's only here for short period, it'll be better than nothing."

"Sure, but I need to go home afterwards. Don't forget we're helping Noemi move tomorrow."

Tom nodded. In a wide movement, he drew his two rusty swords. His enthusiasm made Misty laugh and she followed him behind the house.

***

Achille was in a small garden. He was delicately harvesting some red tomatoes requested by Dyol. To celebrate his return, she dusted an old recipe that she was keeping only for special occasions.

Crouched in a trench, he was humming a song which he had heard in his multiple travels. On his hips were two spheres. One was light green, and the other was darker. He came out of the bushes with a full basket and went towards the house. He wasexamining the amazing garden set up by Dyol: an empty backyard with a little fence and the forest to surround everything. Even if they were neighbour with their son's best friend, the houses were well-spaced.

A branch cracked. Achille frowned and tightened his grip on the fine

wood basket. Tom rushed out of the forest, his two swords in his hands, dashing toward his father with the intention of killing him.

“Surprise Attack!” barked Tom.

With his two blades Tom sliced vertically. In the blink of an eye, Achille took the light green sphere with his right hand and pulled on it. It turned into a handle, and as he continued his movement, it started to shape itself into a sword. He completed his motion and parried his son's assault.

“It’s no longer a surprise if you say it.”

Tom frowned but his father pushed him away with his foot. Tom fell on his back when two boomerangs flew out from behind the trees. With no surprise, Achille slapped them to the ground with the flat part of his blade.

“'Afternoon Misty,” he said to the trees.

Disappointed, Misty came out of her hiding spot. Seeing that their assault had failed she picked up her weapons and sheathed them. She was not used to such failure.

“You had a good day?”

“The DUELS, Sir,” she politely replied.

“I see, Flora is still as pitiless as ever.” He laughed. “Are you staying for dinner?”

Misty was always inclined to reply with the same politeness. For amount of times she had met Tom’s father, she still considered him as a stranger.

“I can't, thank you, I’m expected at home. However, I am grateful for the offer. See you tomorrow Tom.”

“See ya,” he replied still laying in the grass.

Misty ran towards her house. If she took too long to get there she would get one of her father’s never-ending lecture.

“Charming young girl,” Achille said for the umpteenth time. “Strange, but charming. When do you plan on telling her?”

“I’m working on it,” mumbled Tom while getting up.

“Here, I know it’s a little late but happy birthday.”

Achille removed his belt and threw it to him. On the leather strip was two spheres the size of a closed fist.

“Hazblades,” specified Achille. “They will replace your training swords.”

“They seem quite impressive. How do they work?”

“Their technology is very advanced. Flora analyzed them. They read the prints of the owner and take the most suitable shape for them. Pressure is enough to activate the hazblades. They are impossible to scratch and they won’t rust.”

Tom tied the belt around his waist. He detached the dark green hazblade which was held on by mere suction.

“A black one and a white one,” replied Tom ignoring the green color. “It looks like a judge of justice.”

He tightened his grip on the spheres and both morphed into the shape of swords. The model was different from his father's, but was exactly the one he dreamt of. The pommel had a white X incrusted in the black sword and a black one in the white sword. The handle was sufficiently long to hold it firmly without being needlessly hefty. The simple guard was perpendicular to the sword and the sharp blade thickened up to a centimeter on the fuller side of the blade. The curve was somewhat imitating a J-shape without the hook at the end. From the pommel to the point, the hazblade must have been around 70 centimetres long.

“Awesome,” beamed Tom, delighted.

“Let’s bring those tomatoes to your mom before they sprout in the basket.”

Achille left Tom outside while he was entering the house, satisfied with his questionable joke to which Tom paid no attention. For the next fifteen minutes, he tried to attach the hazblades back on the belt. He ended up hooking the first one, and five minutes later understood the concept.

His father came back out to announce that dinner was ready. He only needed to press the hazblades against the place where they should rest. To draw them from the belt, he had to pull with a pressure of 10 kilograms. Tom found this concept ingenious; this way his hazblades wouldn't fall by accident.

Tom came back in his house and went to the bathroom. He passed in front of a closed room with a locked door. Its access had always been highly restricted. He could go out of the house whenever he wanted, do whatever he pleased. The only rule was to never enter this room. Tom had always respected this rule even if he was dying to take a look.

Tom washed his hands and sat at the table. He told his parents how he completed the DUELS while sleeping. His father had promised him that as soon has he passed his exams, Tom would be authorized to follow him on his trips and access the mysterious room. Until then, he had to attend class. Tom was wishing from the bottom of his heart to be able to follow into the steps of his father to continue his dream. Unfortunately, he couldn't focus, sit and read his notes or a book. Results: he was hoping to pass the DUELS each year for the past three years, even if he had forgotten how this exam was called. Incidentally, the more Tom was thinking about it, the more he was wondering if it wasn't called DULSE or ELUDS.

In any case, he had done his best. Now, all he could do was wait for the results by mail. Beside he had made his choice. Whether he passed or not this exam, he had enough of school. He didn't need a SLUDE to be a swordsman. Misty and Noemi were sure to pass and Tom refused to attend school without these two.

His thoughts had disturbed him all night long. In his bedroom on the second floor, he removed his belt and put it on the night stand. The night had fallen and this day had exhausted him mentally, even with his five hours nap. The scenes from his dream came back to mind. Tom fell asleep and they reappeared with the same character and the same conclusion.

Confused, Tom was suddenly woken up around nine in the morning by a succession of friendly slaps. Opening his eyes, he saw Misty trying to wake him up. He forced her to stop and ask her what she was doing in his room.

“We're helping Noemi move,” she reminded him.

“Oh, right!”

Tom jumped out of bed and put on the first pair of pants he could find. He passed a grey sweater over his head and tied his pants with the belt his father gave him. They quickly rushed down the stairs.

“New acquisition?” asked Misty, talking about his hazblades.

“Birthday gift,” replied Tom while picking fruits from the basket on the table.

“Late…”

“Yeah, but you know my father.”

“No, I meant us, *we* are late.”

They arrived at Noemi’s house eight minutes later, out of breath. A special carriage, pulled by horses, was borrowed to make the few kilometers trip with their personal belongings. Achille and Dyol were already on site to help them.

The day passed in an oppressive silence. Tom and Misty were trying to keep Noemi’s morale up, but despite their attempts, she couldn’t stop thinking that at dusk, she’d have to forget about them. Obviously they’ll keep in touch, but it would never be the same again.

As time flew by, the preparations ended, and as planned, at dusk, they were set to go.

“We’ll write to each other,” said Misty, regretful.

“Yes. I will try to convince my mom to correct our DUELS first and I’ll give you some news.”

“See you later, small fairy,” said Tom while smiling. “We'll visit you before you start getting bored.”

"I'll hold you to that."

Tom nodded and the half-elf climbed in the carriage. After a smile, she disappeared behind a dusty white curtain and the horses started their journey toward the south-east. Destination: Terfie.

"I'm going home," said Tom.

Misty approved with a nod and followed him after seeing the carriage disappear under the setting sun.

For the next five days, Tom exclusively trained with his hazblades to pass time. He managed to forget Noemi's departure and the dream he had twice. Misty came and left. Training for an hour or two was plenty enough for her. She'd rather go to the mail counter in the village to see if she had received a letter.

"Tuesday the 2nd day of the 6th month of the year 881

This is it, we are finally installed. The trip was alright and my mom corrected our DUELS. As you may suspect, Misty and I (I presumed you are reading this letter with Tom) have obtained our Diplomas, but Tom flunked…. Nah, I'm kidding he got it too."

"Dummy! She scared me," complained Tom.

"Wait, there's more."

Misty shushed him and both continued reading.

"I don't know how, but he wrote answers of Misty's level. By the way, mom was really intrigued by a page in your document, Misty. I don't know why, but she told me she wanted to study something. On another note, the weather in Terfie is really hot, probably because it's in the desert and near the seal of fire, but at least we have an oasis! You should come swim one of these days. Don't have too much fun without me!

Kisses."

Noemi Watson

Chapter 2:
A Target Rebels

Tom found himself in the dark room for the third time. He tried in vain to find an alternative, but he lacked the strength and it wouldn't change the outcome. Only the conversation he was having with the vicious figure would slightly change in the course of his numerous visits there.

If Tom could move, it was not to fight or run, but to find a way to finish himself off quicker. To be able to get rid of this dreadful feeling of guilt. But it was impossible for him to move. His body, like a rock, was anchored to the floor.

He had been too weak. He thought he was stronger than everyone else, but he was just an ordinary boy with an extravagant dream. He sobbed, not out of pain, but out of shame. Now, he knew. It was a feeling of shame and despair that haunted him.

“Alas! My plan can begin.” whispered the voice.

“What... What plan?” panted Tom.

“If I tell you, you won't act accordingly.”

A reflection flickered in the darkness. That same dented sword spun in his owner's hands, who moved forward and buried it in Tom's back. His pain exacerbated. He had never really seen the weapon before, but he could feel every single dent against his ribs. The last breath left his body and he lied on the floor with empty eyes.

***

Midnight. The trees were dancing with the wind, the moon was full and it illuminated the whole village of Tamber. The sky was cloudless, but a

The silhouette moved its loaded arm, and threw the ammunition toward Tom’s house. It travelled the distance, and landed in Dyol's precious garden. The impact was weak, but enough to shake the house.

“What was that?” Achille asked Dyol.

“You don't think someone would attack the village?” she wondered.

“I'll go take a look,” he said, worried.

“I'll be right behind you.”

He jumped in a pair of pants, fixed his shirt, and opened his room's door on the fly. He climbed over the railing, and jumped to the ground floor. He landed in a heroic pose and stayed like that for a split-second before running outside. Dyol, less athletic, came down the stairs the traditional way. She grabbed her helmet that she put on her red head, then met up with Achille out the door.

They expected an army at their door, but it was far from being the case. There was only a shadow turning its back to them, floating three metres off the ground. In its hand, a second meteor was being loaded.

With no hesitation, it threw the burning ball at random in the village, which landed by some villas of Tamber. A fire erupted, and panic spread throughout the villagers.

“What are you doing?” panicked Achille.

He proudly held his twin blades, ready to retaliate.

“Me?” innocently asked the shadow.

It turned around. Achille's eyes met his opponent's, and he stood there frozen. His body could no longer respond. How was it possible? Years had passed, but he did not forget that face.

“Vince…”

Usually, the half-elf would have bowed down with pretentiousness for such a presentation, but he was too bitter about what Achille did to him. He only had a twisted, sadistic smile on his face.

“You have no idea the hell you made me go through,” growled Vince

putting his feet to the ground.

“Let me send you back!”

Achille charged at him. He made a horizontal slash on his opponent. Seeing the man throwing himself on him so easily made Vince cringe out of pity. A shield and a serrated sword with a golden handle, appeared in the enemy's hands. To free himself, the half-elf kicked Achille away, who staggered and fell to the ground.

In the darkness of the night, Vince's attention was drawn by two glistening dots. He moved his shield to the right, and two black dagger jabbed right into it.

“It's mainly because of you I died,” noted Vince.

The half-elf invoked a gust of wind, which shoved Achille and Dyol away. The wind blades clawed them in the face and all over their bodies. Around them, the trees were uprooted and the window panels flapped violently.

When the storm died down, Vince put his hands to the ground and a six meters tidal waves formed. It submerged Achille and Dyol then faded in the forest, leaving the warriors breathless. Vince’s wicked smile turned into a victorious grin. He moved toward them.

A grey light passed between him and his preys. Vince felt a horrible pain in his stomach. He instinctively put his hands to his side, which was rapidly covered in blood. Vince turned to see what had blocked his route.

Tom was standing in front of him, his face slightly tilted and he looked at him with rage. In his hands he held his hazblades, the tip of the dark one still dripping with blood.

Vince frowned. Who dared to disturb him in such a moment?

“If you stay in my way kid, I'll blow that cute little head right off your shoulders.”

“Don't you dare touch Tom, Vince,” gasped Achille.

Trying to get back up, he had dug his twin blades in the ground, and

was coughing to get the water out of his lungs.

“Tom, uh?” repeated Vince, interested.

“So you're the famous Vince everyone talk about in History class?” asked Tom. “The half-elf that got his brains exploded by my father?”

“He's your son too?” cried out Vince, like he was an old friend. “Oh that is just too precious!”

“What do you want with them?” followed Tom.

“Their deaths! The death of every elite members. All of them, but not here. I want to kill them together! I'll first capture them, bring them to a castle, torture them for a while and when I'm satisfied, BANG!”

He hit his swords against his shield, as if he was imitating a guillotine. Tom frowned. What kind of person would be that crazy? Regardless, he had to put an end to these shenanigans.

“Stay out of this, Tom!” cried his mother.

Tom turned to look at her. Her eyes were begging him not to get involved in this story.

“Turning your back to the enemy? You must be quite a poor swordsman. I could capture you too, now that I think of it.”

Tom turned to face Vince, who had raised his hand towards the boy and a green sphere started forming at his feet.

“Tom, move!”

His father tackled him to the side, making him roll to the ground. The dust made him cough and the impact had crushed his lungs. Lifting his head, he saw his father getting sucked in a green sphere. Tom wanted to protest, but his lungs wouldn’t allow him. He coughed some more.

His father, in the see-through sphere, had collapsed. It must have been filled with anaesthetics. On his left, his mother had been captured by the same type of bubble.

“Let them go!” gasped Tom trying to get back up.

“You are an annoying little kid,” said Vince. “Sounds about time I

shut you up."

Vince walked to Tom still lying on the ground, paralysed. He was scared. What could he do against a war veteran that had just defeated his parents? Vince was standing right above him. Far away, a door slammed and footsteps approached toward him, but it was too late. No one would have time to arrive before his death.

"Ha!" exclaimed an afar voice.

Vince ignored it. He lifted his sword, ready to kill Tom, when a boomerang hit him right in the jaw. The weapon made him step back, staggered. The boomerang, still whirling, returned in the hands of its owner, who ran to Tom.

"Misty!"

She glanced at him for a second then redirected her attention to the enemy.

"Who is he?" she asked Tom.

"Vince. He's after my parents and the others."

"Vince the half-elf? The one mentioned in the DUELS?"

The door to Misty's house opened once more. Her father stumbled outside. Even at this distance, Tom knew with certainty that man was extremely drunk.

"Misty! Come back home!" he screamed at her. "Let that pretentious family deal with their own problems. Don't get mixed up in their business."

"No dad! They need our help, can't we do anything at all?" begged Misty.

"No way!" he said with a sadistic look toward Tom and his family. "Those people always had life going for them, they deserve all of this. If you wish to throw yourself at their feet, so be it! I always knew you'd betray your family for them."

Misty's father went back inside, slamming the door behind him.

"I hate him," whispered Misty.

Tom was watching the scene from the beginning, and had completely forgotten Vince. When he redirected his attention on the enemy, his parents had disappeared. Vince was still floating in front of them, a smile both amused and embarrassed on his face.

Tom looked left and right, trying to find his parents but he didn't see them anywhere. He was about to ask Vince, who bypassed him.

“Don't bother, they're already at the castle. I'm sorry I didn't wait for you to solve your family problems. I'm a busy man.”

Tom got back up, furious. How could he have played him like this? He grabbed his hazblades, and charged at Vince with all the rage burning inside him. With a sneer, Vince dodged his assaults without any problems. He was making a complete fool out of Tom.

“Give them back!”

“No,” answered Vince with a sarcastic tone.

In the distance, screams of horror and desolation echoed in the huge fire. Tom, who whined about his quiet life a few days earlier bitterly regretted his words. All these innocent people were dying. Friends, acquaintances and all their close ones were suffering in the flames. Their skin were boiling in the fire and he couldn't do anything about it.

Vince pushed Tom back with his shield and dodged Misty’s boomerangs in an elegant swirl.

“Next will be that rubbish professor and Achille's father. Feel free to join me in Terfie. Tom and… Misty was it?”

Neither of them answered. They hated him from the bottom of their souls. Vince lingered his gaze on Misty and smiled stealthily.

“I'll even give you a reason to follow that brat.”

Misty's raised her eyebrows with disbelief. A reason to follow Tom? She didn't really need one.

A fire bomb charged in Vince's hand. Just like the other meteors, it grew to the size of a house. Then he stared at Misty the same way he looked

at Socrate twenty-five years earlier, when he was about to kill Michelle, enjoying every glimpse of hope fading from her face, as she understood his plan.

From the tip of his finger, Vince threw the meteor at Misty's house. The fire ball sizzled in the sky, and rammed into the villa. The house shattered like bowling pins. No one could survive such an assault. It was a guaranteed death.

“NO!”

Misty tried to run to the burning house, but Tom threw himself at her to stop her. If she tried to rescue her parents, she would just end up like them. While struggling, Misty fell to the ground, bringing Tom with her. Vince, floating above them, spoke to them:

“I love killing. I wonder who will be my next victim. Oh, maybe those two have a son too. Anyways, don't forget to join me there. I'll be waiting.”

Vince winked at them and disappeared in the night. There was a big smoke cloud in the sky from the fire he had just caused. A few seconds later, it started raining. Misty cried in the mud. She wouldn't try to save her parents anymore. True, they always had been mean to her. They had always mistreated and despised her, but they were her only real family.

Tom had rolled beside her. He sat in the grass, staring at his feet and trying to figure out what had happened. His parents, his life... it had all been stolen from him. A few tears mixed themselves among the rain drops soaking his face and hair. He had been so weak, so stupid, so... novice.

His parents had been caught when he turned his back to Vince, because his father sacrificed himself to save him.

The clock was ticking. Seconds flowed, just like the rain. Neither of them dared to move. In the distance, the screams started to fade as the fire went out. Tom reviewed the fight scene by scene for almost an hour. Every time, he found a new mistake he had committed. His distraction when Misty and her father were arguing and his paralysis before her arrival were just

examples of his negligence.

How could he call himself the best swordsman in the world? He was disgusted by his pretentiousness, his mistakes, his inattention and everything else that caused him to fail tonight. But sitting in the rain wouldn't change what just happened. He had to take back what had been stolen from him and stop Vince's madness. Tom had nothing to gain at being the best... Actually, he did. He still wanted it, but for another reason now: to stop pointless sacrifices, and protect his friends and family.

Tom got up. A detail just crossed his mind like a shock-wave. He had to warn Aleck and Flora. Furthermore, from what Vince was saying, he was also after Noemi. He walked to his house, the only one still standing in the neighbourhood.

Misty tilted her head towards him. Why was she crying like an idiot? Tom was going through the same thing as her. His parents were going to die if they didn't do anything. Without a word, she slowly got back up. She patted her butt to unstick the drenched fabric of her shorts off her skin, and she followed him to his house. What could she say that would lift his spirit, as well as hers? There wasn't much to say. She silently stood in the doorway.

Tom went to the second floor, and came back a minutes later, with a bag in hand.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

Tom didn't answer right away. It was obvious. He looked in the storage, took some water bottles and some food then added them to his package. When he opened his bag, he found a paper note. He recognized Misty's hand writing. The note read:

"*I'll see you in six years, wait for me. It's a promise!*"

Tom didn't understand what he was looking at, so he tossed the note in a corner. He had no time to clean up so he'd take care of it when he would return. Remembering Misty's question, Tom deigned to answer her.

“Go look for them,” he answered in a neutral tone.

Venture in the world? Tom couldn't make it alone. He was stronger than she was, yes, but he didn't know Mana like Flora had taught her. Without her, Tom would run in circles thinking he was making progress.

“I imagine we have no other option,” she said, sadly.

Tom froze in place. He turned his head to Misty.

“What do you mean by ‘we’? I'm going alone. I care way too much about you to tangle you in such a story.”

“You're kidding me, right?” antagonized Misty. “That monster just killed my parents, and you want me to stay put?”

“Precisely.”

Tom finished packing his bag and put it on his back. He walked by Misty, who unsheathed her boomerang to block his way out.

“I'm coming with you, whether you like it or not.”

Tom sighed. It was unavoidable. He wanted to spare her a destitute life, but her mind was made up. She wouldn't budge, and she was willing to fight over it.

“Fine, do was you wish,” settled Tom. “I'm not…”

Tom's gaze stopped on the door he had never been allowed to cross. His father had promised him he would have access to the room, if he passed his DUELS, and Noemi had confirmed it in writing. Therefore, he could enter… couldn't he?

He pushed Misty out of the way, and walked toward the door. He grabbed the knob and opened it. The room was covered in darkness. A little lantern was hanging from the ceiling. Tom turned the crank, and light filled the room. He looked around, the walls were filled with black and white photo of his parents holding an infant. In the centre stood a desk filled with papers. On his left, was a shelf filled with binders. On each one was written the word *Memoirs*, followed by a series of dates.

“What is that?” Misty asked.

“My father's memoirs. He writes them for Flora. Do you know the exact date my father beat Vince?”

“The 22nd day of the 10th month of the year 856. That was an exam question,” she proudly answered.

“Can you find the memoir about it and read it?”

Misty looked at the series of dates, and took the first binder. She read it out loud and Tom was listening to her while continuing his investigation of the room. In a corner of the room, he found a pouch filled with gold; with no hesitation, Tom took it. His trip was certainly not going to be free. Misty finished her reading with sadness in her voice.

“He even killed that civilian…”

Tom wasn't paying attention anymore. He had just found a dusty chest. If his father was keeping gold at eyes reach, he couldn't imagine what he would keep under lock. He pulled on it and saw that the key was still in the lock. He turned it, and opened the lid. Inside was a small jet black object, it was shaped as an X.

In the centre of the cross was a small white ball, which was probably holding the four branches together. For its size, it was very heavy.

“What is this?”

Misty looked over her shoulder. She frowned as if she was trying to remember. She blinked several times, before her eyes grew wide in wonder.

“It's an Ixcross! Flora mentioned it once in an archaeology class. It's an object that dates from the year 0. It's some sort of amplifier that increases human strength.”

“And how does it work?”

Getting impatient, Tom started shaking the little object in all direction. The Ixcross lit up in a weak white aura, and spun around Tom, who tried to get rid of it with the back of his hand, but the Ixcross dodged all his blows. After a moment, it stopped in front of the boy and seemed to be evaluating him. Then, without any notice, it jammed itself in his left

shoulder. Tom shrieked in pain and surprise.

“What is it doing? Get it out!”

Misty looked at his arm. The skin had already healed over a part of the Ixcross. The black X and the white ball in the centre were still visible, but there was no way to take it out by hand.

“Impossible,” she responded. “It's imbedded in your muscle, and in your bone. We'd have to cut your arm off to remove it.”

“What will it do to me?” worried Tom. “Is it deadly?”

“No, an Ixcross only has beneficial effects. It is the only one that is known to exist. Which is probably why your dad was keeping it under lock. From what I remember, it increases stamina, and the regeneration speed of the beholder. But its capacities may not be limited to that. After all, Flora didn't study its effect on a test subject.”

Tom rolled his eyes. He seemed to be thinking a few seconds, but reluctantly chose to keep it.

“We should leave now, if we want to warn Noemi and her parents,” said Misty.

Tom approved with a nod. He wasn't fond of being some kind of machine, but the fact that maniac was still at large was making him even more edgy. He finished his preparations, then left for the south east with Misty.

According to her, if they walked for the whole night, they would get to the sandy city the day after at noon. It was located about 50 kilometres away. If they kept a steady pace, like five kilometres per hours, the math would add up.

They stopped at sunrise, when the scenery changed. The dusty path surrounded with greenery and trees completely disappeared, only to be replaced by a gigantic desert. Here and there, huge boulders came out of the ground with an incredible magnitude.

Delighted, Tom looked behind him, breathing quietly. He thanked

his numerous training sessions that built his stamina to such a level. Misty, on the other hand, didn't seem so pleased.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“Do you really want to enter a desert when the sun is rising?” she gasped between two breaths.

“We don't really have a choice”

“Pyro lives in the Fire ruins south west of Terfie, and the village is in the middle of the desert. But according to Flora, there's an oasis in the city. It will be easier to locate if we see trees.”

“Let's hurry, then,” settled Tom. “The faster we get there, the better. Don't forget we’re limited on water supplies.”

Misty approved with a convinced nod. They continued their route, without wearing themselves out. They couldn't afford to drain their energy in such a weather. On the way, they drank a lot more than they had anticipated. Wanting to leave some for Misty, Tom limited his consumption.

Every time they went up a dune, Tom released a new profanity, each more creative than the previous. Sand as far as the eye could see in every direction, even from where they came. It's at that moment that Tom was happy to have a friend with a good geographic memory. The hours passed and Tom was under the impression that they weren't moving. His mouth was dry and at every step the screech of the sand irritated him more and more physically and mentally. He even started to wonder if he had as much sand in his boots as there was outside.

They came across a maze of rocky cliffs. Tom hurried in their shadow and waited for Misty to join him; she ran in the shade of the next. The game was childish, but oh so enjoyable. Since he was limited on his water intake, unlike Misty, this kind of detail was more precious than his pouch of gold.
Tom chased after Misty, and got in front of her.

“I hope we can keep this up until Terfie,” he said to her.

“Ah!”

Tom stopped in his run, and turned his head towards Misty. A gigantic worm had swallowed and clenched his sharp teeth around her leg near her knee. Without warning, it tried to drag her in the sand. Mechanically, Tom grabbed his hazblades and charged at the worm.

In a heavy motion, he sliced it vertically. A fraction of a second went by, before the worm split open. Misty removed her lacerated leg from it, her shin soaked with blood.

Horrified, Tom looked at the monster he had just killed. The worm had a greenish grey skin, teeth sharp as daggers all around its maw, big dark eyes and was between a metre and metre and a half long. All around them, several other worm burst out of the sand. Tom was starting to panic. Misty, hopping on one leg, hid behind Tom, and leaned against his shoulder.

“What are those things?” he nervously asked.

“Sandworms, They usually only come out in the 8th month, that’s why I didn’t pay attention.”

“Can we outrun them? How far are we from Terfie?”

“About 10 kilometres but I'm losing a lot of blood.” She whined.

Tom cursed out loud. With no warning, he turned his back to the monsters, lifted Misty up under her back and knees, and ran in the same direction they were going five minutes earlier.

“What are you doing?” she worried. “You can’t run 10 kilometres with me in your arms…”

“Shut up,” huffed Tom still looking at the horizon. “I know, I'm hoping to get away from them.”

Misty fell silent like he had asked. Right now, she hated herself. She had seen Tom's game regarding the water intake from the beginning, but she didn't say anything. She needed it more than he did, even if she didn't want to see him deprived of it. If she died of thirst, he would get lost and die soon after. Now, she got caught by a worm hidden in the sand and Tom had to risk his life for her once more. Her eyes filled with tears.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

Tom, who was looking straight in front of him, quickly glanced and her. In her eyes, he could see the innocent eight year old she once was. Behind them, sand furrows were quickly catching up to them.

“I always told you you could count on me, no matter what. Didn't I?”

“... I know...”

There was a moment of silence between them. Tom kept on running, but he was getting more and more out of breath.

“*You are everything to me,”* he thought.

One of the worms ferociously hit Tom's back. Misty slipped out of his arms, and flew off in the burning desert. She rolled down one of the dunes. The sand infected her leg, making her feel woozy. Was it because of the heat, or because she lost half a litre of blood?

“*Tom,”* she mumbled mentally.

Her vision dimmed. She could still see Tom at the top of the dune, collapsed to the ground screaming her name, though she couldn't hear him. She saw him get back up, draw his hazblades out, and turn toward two sandworms that had been following them, then she turned her eyes. A hooded shadow stood beside her. In the shade of its hood, she could only distinguish a smile.

Vince? They were out of luck. She could feel herself getting weaker and Tom would have to take care of Vince alone, after eliminating all those monstrosities. She couldn’t keep her eyes open.

Tom, at the top of the hill, had just decapitated one of the worms. The second let out a screech and tried to bite Tom's arm, who dodged, and gave a horizontal hit on its head. The blade went through the sandworm's eyes, and pierced it. Tom regretted not having struck deeper.

The animal was writhing on the ground. Tom lifted his white hazblade to finish it off, but hesitated. Should he kill another innocent creature? After all, the beast was only trying to feed itself. Tom lowered his

weapon, and the ground started shaking. The worm, still alive, escaped in its element. Tom put all his attention to the earthquake, and he froze in fear at what was causing it.

A worm, similar to the one that had been attacking them, emerged from the sand in a long, continuous movement. The more Tom looked at it, the more he thought the worms he was facing before were nothing compared to this gigantic monster. It must have been 25 times bigger, completely grey, and had teeth the size of a sword. How in the world could Tom beat something this huge?

The animal finally got out of the sand. Its gigantic tail slightly resembled a mermaid's: palmed and just as slimy, but a lot bigger.

"*You've got to be kidding me,"* groaned Tom mentally.

The sandworm turned and gave a powerful tail whip on Tom's body. The impact lifted him in the air, and threw him against a rocky cliff. Tom felt like he had been run over by a train. The rock, a metre thick, crumbled and the boy fell at its base. He could feel blood running down his neck and spine. A thick darkness veiled his sight.

He wanted to save everyone, he was ridiculous. He couldn't even reach the next town. In the obscurity, thickening by the minute, an electric discharge detonated in the desert. The electricity noise rolled in an infernal thunder. Slowly, Tom fainted.

Chapter 3:
Goddess?

“What happened?”

Slowly, he recalled the last things he saw. The creatures assault, his escape attempt with Misty and the giant monster who ejected him against the boulder.

“I’m hurting everywhere. Did it kill me?”

Tom's eyes quivered. They were forced open and a powerful beam penetrated his pupil. They released his eyelid and it closed by itself. A second later, his right eye suffered the same treatment. The pain was agonizing: his brain hurt so much, he could feel his pupil contract. He had one hell of a migraine.

He blinked a few times in order to accommodate to the weak light of the room and his sight adjusted after a few seconds.

Noemi was standing next to him, holding a light still lit. She waved it in all directions before turning it off, then left it on a small surgical steel table. Against it was resting a wooden staff. A violet ribbon was tied to its center in order to provide a better grip.

On the side, a man wearing a cape was patiently waiting while Misty was laying unconscious in a nearby bed. Outside, the pouring rain was violently hitting the windowpanes. It seemed like the rain cloud from Tamber had caught up with them.

Tom stopped his tired eyes on the man under the cape. His face was unveiled. Far away in his memory, Tom remembered this man. He was a cute boy, had black hair with a purple tint and shiny blue eyes that were sparkling like only those of Misty could. He was at least forty years old, but looked like

a young adult. What was is name? Noemi called out to him.

“Naffo, how's Misty doing?”

The man looked behind him. Misty was peacefully sleeping, a gigantic bandage attached around her leg.

“She's in the same state she was five minutes ago.”

“It bothers me that we have to leave her leg open for so long. I hope mom will pick up the samples she needs fast.”

“Focus on sealing Tom’s bones.”

Tom? So he knew him. Yes… Naffo! This name was coming back to him now. He was working for the Manian government. He was a friend of his father and grand-father. At the time, he was following them for some special missions. He is an elf like Flora, but was able to hide it from the government thanks to his dark hair.

As soon as the name of the professor came to his mind, the door opened, as if she was waiting to be called. Flora walked in the room, two syringes in hand. She approached Misty and took the first one which seemed ordinary. She put on white gloves before sticking the syringe between the red bandages. Without restrain and with a twisted smile, Flora drew the excess of blood which already had started to stain the bed underneath her.

Tom laid his eyes on Misty. Her eyelids were shaking in pain, but she didn’t move. She was terribly pale; from the four litres of blood she had, she surely had lost more than one. Flora removed the syringe, and put it on the steel table. At that moment, Aleck entered the room which prompted Naffo to stand up. Tom thought he was about to salute the man, but both walked towards Misty.

“Restrain her,” Flora said.

Naffo grabbed her shoulders and Aleck pinned her thighs against the mattress. Both looked at each other with conviction before giving a sign to Flora. The professor uncaped the second syringe, and Tom's heart skipped a beat. Instead of a single needle, there were three of them, all linked to a glass

vial.

Aiming at Misty's chest, Flora aligned the three needles on her left breast and stabbed them in. Instantly, the teenager's eyes widened. Red veins appeared around her pupil and her back arched violently. Misty's body was convulsing in pain. Her jaw gaped wide open. A shout was trying to escape her throat but the needle seemed to be sucking the air out of her lungs.

Tom's eyes filled with tears. He wanted to oppose, to fight and to push them away, but he couldn't move a muscle. He could barely use his voice. Half paralysed, he was looking at Noemi. She was sadly biting the nail from her thumb waiting for everything to end. She had completely forgotten about Tom.

Flora pulled on the syringe's ring, and a shiny pink liquid began to fill the vial. Misty was struggling like she was being exorcised. Flora frowned, and Naffo put all his weight on Misty's shoulders. He was crushing her against the bed until she couldn't move anymore.

"Stop, mom!" panicked Noemi.

"I'm almost done," she claimed.

The metal ring reached the top of the syringe, and Flora instantly tore it from her heart. She took a bandage and applied it on the three holes she had pierced. Naffo lifted her and the professor rolled the gauze around her. She tied the whole thing in the back and Naffo brought her down. Aleck released her legs then walked towards Tom's bed.

Tom worried: was it his turn? Apparently so. Flora took out another syringe kit. The same kind that she had just used on Misty. Once again, Flora found a bloody wound on Tom and extracted some blood.

"What are you going to do to me?" mumbled Tom weakly.

Flora startled in surprise, as she was probably not expecting to see her student awake. She got a hold of herself and continued while providing some explanations. Tom could see Aleck at the end of the bed; he had climbed on him to retain his legs with all his weight. Naffo was already above

him, holding him tight.

“I need a sample of your plasma.”

“Plasma?” replied Tom.

“Mana,” explained Noemi, worried. “It’s your vital energy.”

“Why?”

“I noticed something about Misty that I would like to study. However, I need a comparaison sample. It needs to be from someone who's not an adult yet, and, between you and I, we both know Noemi’s reserve isn’t sufficient, isn’t that right Tom?”

“Is it painful?” worried Tom

“You'll see,” she said half-amused. “Are you ready?”

Both men nodded and Naffo pushed him even more into the bed. With his free hands Aleck grabbed Tom's. The pressure he was applying on the broken bones made him scream, but he restrained himself. Why were they making such a scene? Aleck didn’t need to crush him, he was able to endure any kind of pai…

“Ahh!”

The back of Tom arched just like Misty's. He felt like his chest was being impaled by a gigantic lance. His heart stopped beating. Tom tried to free himself from those three needles, but the two men were too strong. Tom gasped for air, he felt like he was drowning. Flora pulled on the metal ring. The pain sharpened intensely, as if Tom had bitten in a black board and continuously grinded his teeth in it while someone was removing his organs. Tom looked at the syringe. This time, instead of pink, a silver grey liquid began to fill the vial. Tom tried to take a deep breath. It was only pain, he could overcome it.

“*Come on, Tom! You're stronger than this! You can take it!*”

Around Tom, the plasma began to spread a grey light, as if the syringe was leaking.

“Be careful, Flora! His Fae is pushing us away.”

Flora removed the syringe brutally.

“All good, I’m done,” she concluded. “Noemi, you can use your powers to heal them. Now!”

Flora had to put emphasis on the last word. Noemi jumped under the pressing order. Tom was panting profoundly. He was looking at Noemi, who grabbed her wooden staff. She spun it between her fingers. She was a healer. Her half-elf blood and her high intelligence gave her some skills, such as near-instant healing. All the cuts, infections, burns, scars, sicknesses and broken bones were fixed by her curative magic. The only thing she couldn’t heal was the exhaustion that came with such injuries, but Tom wasn’t holding it against her. He was already more than satisfied with this perk.

Noemi raised her staff in the air as the adults were leaving. Tom looked at his cuts. His bones mended instantly, just as the lacerations of his flesh. He was no longer in pain, but the exhaustion was preventing him from moving. On his left, Tom could see Noemi remove the bandages around Misty’s leg and throw them on the floor. Under them, the skin was silky smooth. Misty's skin color was back to its usual tone.

Appeased, Tom began to doze off. He tried to keep his sight on Misty as long as he could, but the exhaustion took over him.

Tom was feeling pathetic; the memory of his parents being captured came back to his mind. He had left impulsively, seeking revenge, but he didn’t think this through at all. He was blinded by vengeance and Misty noticed it. That is why she insisted on going with him. He wanted to show that he was strong and brave, but in less than twenty-four hours, he almost got killed by a stupid sandworm. Without Naffo and Noemi's intervention, they would be dead. Once again he acted like a fool. Like the fight against Vince…Vince…

“Vince!”

Tom woke up suddenly. It was the middle of the night and outside the rain had stopped. The moon's crescent shined, showing its deep craters.

How long as he been asleep?

Noemi was sitting on a wooden chair between both beds, poring over a book that Tom would have easily classified as university level.

Tom sat up straight. His arms and legs were stiff. Standing up, he noticed he was only wearing underwear. Seeing him finally awake, Noemi put away her novel. She let her nephew dress up before asking him how he was feeling.

“Fine,” he calmly replied. “How's Misty?”

He walked across the room and sat on the bed by her side. His expression became sad, worried and protective. He passed his hand on her forehead. She was burning, soaked in cold sweat. Tom studied the bed covered in an icy liquid and for a moment, wondered if it wasn’t Noemi who had thrown a bucket of cold water to cool her down.

“She's feverish, but it’s caused by exhaustion, so… There’s nothing I can do.”

Noemi hesitated for a while. The same sad expression veiled her eyes.

“What happened?” she finally asked. “I sent you a letter and two days later you show up, half-dead, in Naffo’s arms.”

It was true. With all those tribulations, Tom never had a chance to explain Vince’s return to the professor, his grand-father and Noemi. Without any pride, Tom began to relate what happened, trying as much as possible to stay objective. During his whole speech, he didn’t take his sight off Misty. He was softly stroking her forehead, caressing her so she would feel safe. He covered every events in details. The capture of his parents and how Misty’s family was murdered, the chase in the desert and the ambush that followed. The only thing he omitted was the strange dreams he had.

“And he's coming for us?” lightly panicked Noemi.

Tom nodded, but smiled to reassure her.

“Don’t worry, I intent to stop him this time”

Noemi approved sadly, and looked at Misty.

“You still haven’t told her, eh?”

“Told her what?”

Tom faked ignorance hoping Noemi was talking about something else.

“That you love her…”

His lips stretched in a sorry smile. He was like an opened book, and god only knew how many she had read.

“Ah…” he gasped without real conviction. “Do you honestly believe she wants to know I love her? Her parents just died because of me. She almost got killed because of my carelessness, and now she's in a coma. I think my love for her is really the least of her worries. Even I, at this point, hate myself…”

Noemi didn’t know what to reply. She chose to change topics by telling him she would report his state and story to her parents. She asked him to keep an eye on Misty, and to call her in case of emergency.

Without any other instructions, she left the room. Tom looked at Misty. For the operation, and her well-being, Noemi or the professor had removed her tight clothes to replace them with something looser: a red bra and yellow shorts. The bra had three small holes at the level of her heart, testimony of the plasma extraction. It was probably the one she was wearing underneath her clothes. Her two pink hair ties had been removed and were put on the night stand. Tom was able to see the mark left by the bands where some strands of hair were bent. Without her pigtails, her hair was coming down a little under her shoulders. Scattered in the bed, soaked by sweat, the tip had a tendency to curl.

With his right hand, he continued to wipe her forehead lovingly, and with his left he took one of the hair ties. Without even realizing, he brought them close to his face. Her scent was still lingering. Ever since the first time he smelled it, it had become some kind of a drug for him. It was a mix of lilac,

cherry blossom, fog and spring. The perfect combination.

Her fever started to break. Still exhausted, Tom laid down beside her. Sleep took him and brought him somewhere he hated.

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“And three,” said the shadow with pleasure.

“Three what?” articulated Tom.

“Members of the elite,” he explained. “Socrate seemed to be really bored on his island with his apprentice. Sadly I have to admit this Nark is not as amusing as you.”

“Vince! At least, have the courage to face me, you coward!”

“Yes, yes, absolutely! Here comes your magnificent Vince,” said the figure while giving itself an important tone.

The shadow took its serrated sword. In the echo of the room, Tom heard Misty’s scream resonate. Her voice was piercing, almost dying. For the first time in his dream, his heart gave out before the blade could act. Slowly, he felt himself falling in the void.

***

Tom crashed on the floor of the bedroom. He opened his eyes. Outside, the sky was clear and sunny. Misty's face floated above her bed watching him with embarrassment. Tom raised an eyebrow with incomprehension.

“Why were you in my bed?” she stammered.

“Oh nothing,” said Tom, astonished. “I was looking over you, while you were sick. I must have fallen asleep… It's the truth,” he added seeing her doubtful look.

“Whatever,” she cut short after a few seconds. “Where are we?”

Misty seemed to have gained back her usual cheerfulness. She even seemed to have forgotten the death of her parents. Tom thought it was a good idea to avoid that subject for now.

“Is there a shower here?” she asked politely.

Tom raised his shoulders. Noemi entered the room with haste. Misty's scream must have alerted her, since she was still wearing her pyjamas. Having heard her question and seeing that everything was in order, she pointed at the second door of the room. Misty got up, took her clothes and went through the bathroom door, leaping.

To see her in such a good mood was raising Tom's morale. He made his bed and Misty's, to be polite, then waited for his friend to come out.

On the other side of the door, Misty walked towards what she called a shower. It was a wooden chamber, with a hole in the ground to evacuate the water. Above the shower, the roof was slightly sinking in. The concept was to fill a glass tank of rain water, and let it warm under the sun. At the bottom of this tank was a small hole, which could be manually opened or closed. Once opened, the gravity was doing its work.

Misty undressed herself and entered the shower. She got it ready while whistling. Once the water started to flow, she stopped. She put a hand against a wooden wall. As the water was falling on her head, her expression became sad: her parents were dead because of her. If she didn't get involved, as her father told her, they would still be alive. Her quarrel with him had distracted Tom, which caused him to lose his own family. He was defeated by the worms because she had been caught. Worse, she took almost all the water ration they had. She wanted to protect him, to guide him to safety, and almost got him killed. What a pitiful friend she was…

Her eyes started to well up with tears. She never wanted to harm him, but she seemed only good for that. She turned off the shower after five minutes and got out. She dried herself, put on her clothes, forced a smile and got out of the bathroom. Tom was waiting for her, he smiled when he saw her. She looked even more charming than usual.

She folded the borrowed clothes. After another five minutes of preparation, they went down the main stairs, which lead them to the dining room.

At the table was the three other occupant of the house: Noemi still wearing her dark blue pyjama printedwith white teddy bears holding pink hearts, Flora wearing a pale lab coat and Aleck wearing his old mission outfit.

Noemi covered, without conviction, a yawn with her hand. Naffo appeared suddenly in the archway, a travel cape on his back.

“How are you feeling today, Tom?” asked Aleck.

“In great shape,” he replied brandishing his fist.

“Great! Then you’ll be able to accompany me.”

Tom and Misty exchanged an intrigued look, but didn’t say anything. Flora continued.

“Meanwhile, Misty and Noemi, you'll come with me to the laboratory. I have to speak with you. Yes, Tom, they’ll be allowed to tell you everything when you return,” she added, seeing Tom was about to protest.

Tom and Misty hurried to eat breakfast, and Noemi took this opportunity to change. She came back in her traditional outfit: a grey skirt, a black shirt and a pink vest with broken white lines, which were mixing between each other to decorate the material. Two pigtails were attached above her ears, freeing her sight and secretly imitating her friend.

Without any further delay, each went their own way. Tom, with Aleck and Naffo, while the girls stayed together. The distribution looked somewhat sexist, but the adults seemed to have something in mind.

Tom followed his grand-father in the city, before they stopped near the oasis. A man was patiently waiting, his back against a palm tree. He was completely bald, and on his forehead, a symbol of Secretia was drawn. He was wearing an orange outfit, which seemed to be made out of artificial leather. Tom noticed the way the clothes were shaped and deduced that the man was well-built. An oddly designed sword was attached to his hip: the handle was actually longer than the blade itself. Some people would have called this a spear, but the weapon had obviously the shape of a sword and was clearly not made to be thrown.

Hearing them, the man opened his eyes. They were slanted, which was usual in his hometown, where the symbol on his forehead came from. Aleck approached him, and addressed to him in a dialect unknown to Tom, but it wasn't Greek. Noemi spoke Greek often for some invocations, and this was far from it. The man replied and Aleck finished the conversation while laughing.

"I'm presenting you Sukhothai," said Aleck. "He owes me a favor, so he accepted to fight you, in order to train you. He's pretty tough."

Tom smiled. He grabbed his hazblade, and detached them from his hips. The two balls transformed in swords, and Tom took an offensive stance.

"So am I," he replied. "I have no intention of letting Vince take you all."

***

Misty came down the stone stairs. She arrived in a completely white basement. From left to right spread all types of machines, vials, papers and all kind of objects. Obviously, Flora didn't lose any seconds to make herself at home. At the centre of the table were the two vials of plasmic liquid Flora had extracted three days earlier.

"Why take me here?" asked Misty, while looking around her.

Noemi asked the same question. Just like Tom had been denied access to the treasure room of his house, Noemi had never been authorized to enter the laboratory of her mother.

"Since the DUELS, there's something I'd like to bring to your attention" explained the professor.

"I know, I'm really sorry," confessed Misty. "I shouldn't have answered for Tom while he was sleeping."

"True, but that isn't what I'm interested in. He would've had the passing grade without your intervention."

Misty became foolishly red. She confessed a crime for nothing, though Flora was already aware. Her writing style, and the type of answers

were obviously not Tom's.

“Look at this page.”

The professor threw her a copy of the test, her own. In fact, she presented only one page. The one asking to explain the power that inhabit the body of all living things. Misty read her answer, and concluded that there was no anomaly. She pointed it out to the professor, who shook her head.

“It’s the blood stain I’m interested in. Do you notice something abnormal?”

Misty remembered her paper cut. She looked at the blood stain, but couldn’t see anything special about it. Noemi's eyes widened. Seeing that the youngest understood something that she missed, she let her explain.

“The blood didn’t oxidize.”

Misty didn’t say anything, but Flora continued the explanation.

“Normally, on paper, the blood is absorbed, and with time, takes a different colour. Yours stayed perfectly clear. Red at a hundred percent, exactly like it had just been dropped. Strange, since it happened almost two weeks ago.”

Flora moved to pick up a novel, which she presented to Misty.

“Ironically,” she continued. “I started to read a novel during the DUELS, which talks about the known gods and the potential ones.”

“Potential?” repeated Misty.

“Yes,” affirmed Flora. “Some people – including yourself; now I can confirm it – have the potential mana to become a divine entity. In other words, if you follow some prerequisites, you could become a goddess.”

“A goddess?” she exclaimed. “Like Mana?”

“Those prerequisites are extremely demanding, so don’t get carried away. Only a few people have this potential, and even less are able to properly activate it.”

“How do we activate it?”

“Currently, you're only a human. To pass from human to goddess,

you must become a *Goddess in training*. You obtain this title from the moment you start conquering the seals."

Misty was listening with care. Noemi, beside her, seemed even more interested than she was.

"You know there's eight seals in the world. Each is controlled by one element and a divinity. Gods only appears in front of their own or those in training. Each seal bears a challenge that the god in training must overcome. Tests of all sort. In return, the god in training will receive a power related to his element… In this case, yours."

"Which element?"

"I'm getting there. Three days ago, I had to steal some mana, without your authorization, in order to sharpen my research. I also took some from Tom, to cancel yours, if it was about to go sideways. Which brings me to this strange fact that I must study in greater depth…"

"Which would be?" asked Misty.

"Do you know the expression universal compatibility? According to the few studies available on this subject, I can say that Tom and you have mana, which adapts itself perfectly to each other. It's something very rare. In any case, this isn't related to my actual study."

"Sorry," said Misty. "So you were about to talk about a way to discover my element."

"Yes, here."

The professor bent over and picked up a white sheet of paper similar to papyrus. She gave it to Misty, and continued her explanations.

"If you focus your energy on this sheet, you will be able to see which elements you'll master. It only responds to divine energy. Focus, and your element will activate. I don't know what will happen, but if you want to stop, put the sheet down and don't touch it. The effects will cease."

Misty hesitated, but Noemi seemed way too excited. She focused her gaze on the sheet, then raised her eyes in the room. Everything had

immobilized. Noemi and Flora were transformed into statues of flesh. Misty frowned. What did all of this mean? She backed out a little to have a better overview and put her free hand on a table. While sliding, she bumped into a vial that fell to the ground. Or should have fallen to the ground? As soon as Misty stopped touching it, the vial immobilized itself mid-air.

Misty panicked, put the special sheet on the table, and immediately everything started moving again. The vial crashed on the ground, which startled Noemi, and the magic sheet burned in a little pink fire.

Flora frowned and Noemi began establishing hypothesis.

“Teleportation? Extreme speed?”

“Those aren’t elements,” corrected her Mom. “What happened?”

“Everything around me froze.”

Flora smiled, the answer was simple, but none of the two teenagers had found it.

“If you conquer all the seals, you will be able to manipulate time.”

“Time? You mean to stop, advance, or rewind time?”

“And so much more. However, you must know that no one can manipulate death. Anyone can kill, but even gods can’t bring back to life someone who died, so don’t believe yourself to be invincible…”

“But if I backup time prior to the death of someone, and I stopped their death from happening?”

“Misty!”

The professor looked straight into the eyes of her student with all the seriousness she had.

“You can’t stop people from dying. If you backup time and prevent their deaths, you create a new temporal branch in the universe; the first will stop existing, but the person you have saved will die a way or another: heart attack, accidents etc. When someone has to die, time or not, they’ll die.”

“So, once I’ll have my powers, I won’t be able to return to the past to bring my parents back?” she sadly asked.

“I’m sorry,” sympathized the professor.

Misty sadly stared at the ground beneath her feet. Noemi followed her gaze, but Flora continued on another subject.

“It’s your choice to conquer or not those challenges. These power could end up being very useful, but the challenges are extremely complex. Cameron Price, the author of that book, was a god in training at the time. He failed the seventh challenge: light. He says that alone, they are extremely difficult. Maybe impossible.”

“You are not coming with us?” asked Misty.

“No, I have too much work here. However, I can give you a map, with the exact locations of the eight seals.”

“I'd like that”

Flora searched her shelves. After a while, she took out a yellow scroll. It was a perfect replica of the map of Mana. With eight different colour pencil, Flora circled eight location on the paper. The closest was red, and slightly south of Terfie.

The professor rolled the scroll and handed it over. Misty grabbed it and waited for Flora to let it go. Once again, she stared into Misty’s green eyes with her steel gaze.

“You should go buy yourself a new backpack and another set of clothes for the journey ahead. Oh, and Misty… Be careful.”

Misty nodded, but maintained eye contact. On the upper floor, a door slammed harshly.

“Noemi!” yelled Aleck. “Come upstairs!”

There was panic in Aleck’s voice. Usually, he was calm and collected, so hearing him in that state was never a good sign. Noemi fled to the ground floor. Misty tried to follow her but Flora held her back.

“Take care of Noemi, when we'll be gone, Aleck and I.”

“Gone?”

“I’m no fool, Misty. If Achille and Dyol were caught and we're on that

list, we'll be next. And I also know that Noemi will be safer with you two than if she stayed here, alone."

"Nothing will happen to her. You should worry about yourselves."

Flora smiled. She released the scroll, and Misty joined Noemi. In the dining room, Misty had a traumatizing vision: Tom was laying on the ground and his blood was spreading on the tiles. Noemi was above him, staff in hand, trying to heal his injuries. Covering her mouth with her hand, Misty tried to articulate a sentence but Aleck answered before she finished.

"Special training. I didn't expect Sukhothai to go without restraint. He got angry when Tom knicked him."

"Noemi, do something!" screamed Misty, with a piercing voice.

The memories of the past few days came back to her: Vince's attack, the sand worms, her parents and now she might lose her best friend. It was too much pressure, and she couldn't bear it anymore.

Flora grabbed her by the shoulders and ordered her to calm down. Having practised the art of healing in the past; she knew it needed a lot of concentration. She would help her daughter, but last time she used the art was sixteen years ago. Even if she still had the skills, the techniques were very far in her memory.

After a few minutes, Noemi completed the operation. She disinfected the wounds, who were filled with sand, sealed them and replaced the blood that had been lost.

"You saved him?" worried Misty

Noemi dried her forehead. She nodded, and got angry at her father.

"Do you want to kill him?! It's really demanding to heal people *in extremis* like that."

Aleck took Tom in his arms and started his way to the guest room.

"I know" he said. "You've been extraordinary, Noemi. You're and your mom are so alike. You could rule the world if you wanted. I'm proud of you."

The compliment made Noemi smile. She turned toward Misty, still in shock.

“Tom'll be alright, he simply need some rest. Let’s go buy what we need.”

“Are you sure?” hesitated Misty.

“Since I’m telling you.”

Noemi gave her a wide smile, showing her teeth to try to convince her even more, but Misty turned toward Flora. One detail was worrying her regarding Tom.

“I feel like Tom has been having nightmares for a few days. Would you have a remedy for that?”

“In my lab, I have a few somniferous poitions that prevent dreaming. I will administer some to him. That will also accelerate his recovery.”

Misty waited while the professor picked up the medication. A few minutes later, Flora came back up holding a round vial; inside was a magenta liquid. She went upstairs, while Noemi pulled Misty toward the town's stores.

Tom had the kindness to share the coin purse between them. Moving between the stores, Misty bought herself some clothes, a backpack with multiple pockets and rations, especially water.

They walked in front of a weapon store and Noemi questioned her regarding the boomerangs.

“Do you plan to keep your current boomerangs?”

“Yes, why? Do you think they're old-fashioned?”

“Not old-fashioned, but let’s just say that they aren’t really threatening,” admitted Noemi with tact.

“It was a gift from Tom. He gave them to me last month for my birthday on the 19th day of the 5th month. They've been specially crafted in Arenight. He made them so they would be extremely sharp, just like swords. They're more like saw blades than boomerangs,” she laughed.

“How do you manage not to cut yourself?”

“Technique…” she replied, shrugging. “I've been throwing and catching them for ten years now. I just have to catch them from the inside.”

Noemi stopped talking. Misty's parents never gave her any kind of gift. Noemi and Tom knew they never really loved her. They gave nothing more than the strict necessary for the past sixteen years. Consequently, her only gifts were coming from her and Tom. There was no way Misty would get rid of a gift received twenty-one days ago.

The girls finished their shopping at around six o’clock. Misty had packed everything in the backpacks Noemi and her were wearing. They were heading back to Flora’s house, walking near the oasis. At the top of a palm tree, a shadowy figure was whistling a victorious and mocking song. The shadow started dangling backward and Misty recognized him immediately.

“Vince!”

Her rage accumulated instantly. In a fluid movement, she brought her hands to her hips grabbing her blue boomerangs. They were folded just like knifes. In a sharp twist of the wrist, she gave them their original shape and threw them. The boomerangs targeted Vince by doing a wide turn towards the exterior to hit the target at the centre like scissors.

Vince let himself fall down. The two boomerangs hit the palm tree and came back toward their owner. On the palm tree, two mark were drawn, as if someone had slashed at it.

“Where's Tom?” he politely asked.

“Unavailable,” she growled while throwing one boomerang.

Vince made his serrated sword appear, and swung it to the boomerang. The object stuck in the sand. Misty frowned.

“Good, let’s make him available,” he smiled sadistically

Vince raise his free hand towards the sky. A giant fireball started to grow. Just like in Tamber, he sent it crashing against a house.

***

Tom woke up to the sound of an explosion. He got up in a jolt, and

looked through the window. Demons were walking everywhere in the city. Was he in hell?

He grabbed his hazblades and transformed them. Without any caution, he jumped out the window. It exploded in small pieces and Tom rolled in the sand. For a split-second, a part of his brain found this move epic.

He got up, and swung his sword verticaly at an imp passing by. He kicked the vermin and swore.

He didn't need further explanations to recognize Vince's signature. Some demons were gathering around the oasis and Tom decided to direct his attention toward it.

Making his way in between the attackers, Tom was barely able to reach Misty and Noemi. Misty had been stunned by Vince and Noemi was protecting her until she woke up. She had withdrawn herself, shaken from effort and panic. She tried to heal injured people as much as she could, while keeping an eye on Misty, still unconscious.

Tom stressed when he saw the professor, his grand-father and Naffo with her. If they didn't want to be captured, of all the places in the world, they had chosen the worst.

"Vince!" roared Tom.

"Ah, Tom, there you are finally," sympathized Vince. "I was waiting for you before I moved on. I noticed that capturing someone without you around wasn't as fun. Socrate disappointed me terribly. I would have thought him more feisty regardless of his old age. You know... since i killed his wife."

Behind, Tom heard someone collapse. He quickly turned his head towards the sound and saw Noemi in the sand. She couldn't keep up. How could she provide aid to a complete city, when it took her everything to heal Tom this morning?

Flora rushed toward her, but her pace was quickly slowing down. Around her, the green sphere started to swallow her up. The anaesthetic worked immediately and she collapsed. On her left, Aleck tried to counter the

gas, but collapsed a second later. Vince seemed to have perfected this imprisonment technique.

“Release them!” ordered Tom, giving an oblique hit in the air.

“I didn’t do it the first time around, I don’t see why I would grant you this request now.” replied his interlocutor, raising his eyebrow.

“I'll kill you,” enraged Tom. “You won’t take them!”

Tom charged at him. Vince shook his head, exasperated. After waiting all this time for Tom to amuse him, he was so disappointing. This time, he would kill him. That would conclude this childishness. He quietly recited something to himself.

“You are pathetic.”

Vince pointed his palm at Tom, who was still rushing him down. A black and violet ray shot out in his direction, like a cannon.

Tom raised his hazblades to protect his face. It was only light, it couldn’t be dangerous. Could it? Tom closed his eyes by reflex, and waited for an impact which never came. In order to protect him, Naffo had thrown himself in front of the boy, and took the blow.

Slowly, he fell on his knees, then on his belly. His eyes were expressionless, devoid of life.

“Naffo!”

“Don’t bother. He was dead even before his knees touched the ground.”

“No!”

Tom bent over him. He shook him to bring him back to life. Seeing this wasn’t working, Tom raised his eyes towards Vince, and gave him the deadliest stare he had.

“You're horrible. I'll kill you, for sure. You can count on that.”

“Hey!” he furiously replied. “That's my job! Whether you like it or not, I couldn’t care less.”

Tom grabbed his hazblades.

“You’re a dead man!”

Vince burst out laughing briefly. He stopped almost right away and talked to himself out loud.

“If I had a gold coin every time I heard this. I would have at least… three,” he joked. “On this note, I must leave you.”

The bubbles flew in the sky in a second. Slowly, Vince joined them. Tom yelled at him to come back, but he wasn’t listening.

“My master will be happy,” said Vince for himself.

Tom stopped yelling. His master? There was someone even more powerful than Vince, who was pulling the strings behind all of this?

Tom fell on his knees. He looked around him. The demons disappeared with Vince. Slowly, the silence started to fill the oasis, broken by Noemi’s wails. She, who passed for a healing ghost during the fight, just realized how much she had been useless.

On the ground, Naffo’s body kept on haunting Tom's mind. Far away, the fire was only aggravating this atrocity.

Tom put his hands to the ground. In his head, he was re-enacting the scene. Drops fell in the sand. Why were they so incompetent?

Chapter 4:
Chronexia

Once again, Tom sighed. It was ridiculous. During training, he considered himself a mid-level swordsman. But as soon as he was facing a new opponent he would bite the dust in fifteen seconds.

When he first appeared, Vince killed a lot of innocent people and Misty's parents. Now, in Terfie, the casualties multiplied. Because of him Naffo sacrificed himself. Why would he do that? Did he owe him something? Certainly not. He should have died in his place.

Tom stood up and walked toward Noemi and Misty. He had a cold look in his eyes but his voice was perfectly clear.

"Are you alright?"

Noemi raised her head toward him, her eyes full of tears and anger.

The answer was rather obvious but Tom only asked to be polite. He knew very well how she felt. It wasn't his parents but he still felt some affection toward them.

Seeing that Noemi was still staring at him, Tom got closer to Misty and lifted her, placing one hand underneath her knees and the other around her back. He started to make his way to Flora's home, but stopped in his track.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

Noemi nodded.

"You know where to find us."

Tom started again toward their temporary home. Before his aunt was out of reach, he told her:

"You were great."

Still walking, he examined Misty's unconscious face.

"You too, I'm sure."

***

Misty woke up a few hours after the incident. She looked at her surroundings. The window was shattered and only a few shards were still attached to the frame. Nobody was keeping her company.

What happened? Did they prevent Vince from capturing Flora and Aleck? Did other people die because of them? What about Tom and Noemi?

Worried, Misty stood up and left the room. Outside the room, on her right, she saw Noemi. She pressed her for answers. Her curiosity was stronger than her preoccupation for Noemi's feelings.

"Tom and I are okay," she said, staring at the floor on her right.

"What about the professor? And Aleck?"

"Tom and I are okay," she repeated with the same saddened tone.

Misty's head fell back. Of course. Why did she hope otherwise? After all, they were facing one of this world most accomplished veteran and… they were just kids.

"Where is Tom?" she asked.

"He's burying Naffo and a few victim."

Misty covered her mouth with her hand. She shook her head feebly. Once again, they couldn't save anybody.

With a perfect timing, Tom arrived home. He was covered in sand and was holding a shovel. He leant it against the wall then made his way to the main table where he took a seat. Noemi and Misty made their way downstairs to meet him but didn't dare to utter a word.

Tom had his face buried in his hands, lost in his thoughts. After a few minutes, he dropped them on the table loudly, startling the girls.

"I'm tired of losing. I'm good at fighting and I refuse to continue down this road. I don't want anybody else to suffer because of my incompetence. I will save everybody and I will search for our parents."

Misty stared at him. He was determined. She wanted to believe him. No. More than that, she wanted to help him.

"Yes. But we need to become stronger," said Misty. "All three of us, we need to become stronger in order to be the best to ever walk this world. And we may have found a way to toughen me up."

"How?" asked Tom.

Misty related the conversation she had with Flora this morning. Noemi filled in the blanks. She still sounded upset and shocked by this night's events.

Tom smiled maliciously. If they had a goddess on their side, Vince would bite the dust. That idea really appealed to him and it didn't seem too hard to accomplish. Time manipulation would, without a doubt, be the best way to reach their goal.

"Alright," concluded Tom. "Where do we start?"

"Flora gave me a map that shows the eight seals' locations" said Misty while foraging in her pockets.

After a few seconds she found the parchment and pulled out a little box that held her glasses. She unfolded the map and bent over it to read.

"If we start by the closest seal, the fire one is south-east from here."

Tom looked at where she was pointing on the map. Just above a circle, *The Fire ruins* was annotated in Flora's handwriting.

"The Fire ruins?" repeated Tom. "Do they have each their own name?"

Misty nodded and pointed at the other seals: the Earth temple, the Darkness sanctuary, the Electricity kingdom, the Water city, the Light altar, the Ice catacombs and the Wind arena.

"We have to visit every one of them?"

Once again, Misty nodded. What else could they do? Vince didn't hint at who would be his next victims. Might as well go to Secretia and make a stop on their way there.

"It's almost midnight," noted Tom. "Let's go to bed and wait for sunrise before we leave. Noemi, are you coming with us?"

"Of course," she replied, mildly insulted. "Last time you tried to reach the closest town, you almost got killed. And you're all that I have left…"

"We'll save them," insisted Misty with a smile. "I give you my word."

Tom stood up and headed to bed. If they left now, they would get lost in the desert. This time, Tom would make sure they have enough water for everyone and that he would protect them no matter what.

Noemi went down to her mother's laboratory and started to read the covers: *Archeology 101*, *Advanced Botany*, *Robotics*… But she had already read them. Her eyes stopped on three other books: *Medicines and Potions*, *Anatomical Surgery and Advanced Biology* and *Devastating Summons*. She stuffed the first two in her bag and started to leaf through the third one. She found two pages stuck to each other that she separated carefully. There, she notice a spell dangerously high ranked. She squinted and smiled, satisfied.

"Apocalypse," she read out loud.

Tom turned over in his bed. It's true that he had spent the day sleeping after that mercenary beat him up, but now it was ridiculous. It was almost three in the morning when he finally fell asleep.

***

"You failed, Tom. They were counting on you and you let them down."

"Shut up, shut up!" yelled Tom.

The shadow crouched next to him. It was whispering in his hear. Every syllable was tearing his soul apart with hate. If only he could move!

"You know it's true."

Its treacherous voice made Tom's eyelids shake with rage.

"I'll kill you," answered Tom.

"Your incompetence will kill people, Tom," said the shadow. "But I won't be one of them. You should be careful to not abandon Misty. At least

before I kill her."

"I forbid you to touch her!" raged Tom.

His hate was growing stronger. To attack his parents was a bold move, but Misty? No way! He wouldn't allow it.

"Hahaha," chuckled the shadow without conviction. "It already happened, Tom. She'll die because of you."

"No… NO!"

"Yes."

His reply was dry and decisive. It was like a blade through his heart. Tom looked down. Oh, right! It was the serrated sword. He collapsed on the floor and a blue crystal was sparkling in his mind.

***

"Misty!"

On his left, the teenager was sleeping in the same bed she used the past few days. Through the broken window, Tom saw that it started raining again. Twice in less than a week? It was rather surprising for this type of place, but it would be easier to cross a rainy desert than a fiery one.

Misty woke up with difficulty. Tom's shout troubled her dreams and forced her to wake up sooner than expected.

"What?" she stammered.

"Let's go."

He surprised himself. He didn't sound groggy at all. He looked through the window again. It was hard to tell exactly what time it was without the sun, but the greyish light made him assume that it was about seven in the morning.

Misty sat up in her bed and put on some more decent clothes. She picked up the backpack at her bedside and met Tom outside the room to go wake Noemi up. They rapidly ate breakfast in silence. They were lost in their thoughts: Tom was preoccupied by his strange dreams, Noemi by her parents' disappearance and Misty by this goddess business. What kind of

challenges would those seals have in store for her?

When Tom finally stood up, the two girls followed him. Before leaving the house for the last time, Noemi headed to the wardrobe and pulled out three capes with an upturned collar.

“They’re waterproof”.

They were dark with a black seam. The first was red like wine, the second was navy blue and the last was green. Misty chose the red one and Noemi gave the green one to Tom.

“I don’t like this color” she added.

Tom shrugged. What color he was wearing was the least of his concern. A cape was a cape, whatever its color. As long as it was fulfilling its intended purpose, it could be rainbow-colored that he couldn’t care less.

He opened the door and came out under the pouring rain. Only a few seconds after, their hair were soaking wet. Following Misty’s instructions, they left Terfie for the Fire ruins.

They walked in the muddy sand for hours. Tom constantly kept an eye on Misty and his hands were resting on his hazblades at all time. If other sandworms came after them, this time he wouldn’t hesitate.

Around one in the afternoon, they started to discern a building on the horizon. Intertwined rocks were rising from the ground like some matte crystal. About one kilometer away from the ruins, they found another rock cluster. At its center, a red dot was sparkling. Maybe both places were linked, but for now their only concern was the ruins’ entrance.

They arrived near the first structure an hour later. It could have been earlier if it wasn’t for Noemi’s constant breaks. Unlike the other two, she didn’t have the physical stamina to walk for hours in sticky sand. Going from dune to dune required a considerable amount of energy.

Misty looked at the intertwining rocks. No mistakes, they were at the right place. After rummaging around, Tom found a staircase leading to an underground cave. Without hesitation, he made his was down and the girls

followed him begrudgingly.

For now, it was rather easy. There was only one corridor leading to more flights of stairs. On the walls, burning torches lit some centuries old hieroglyphs. This place really deserved the ruins appellation.

The stairs led them down one level to another corridor then back up two levels. They turned right and left a few times and made their way through multiple spiral staircases before they finally reached an arch.

It was the delimitation between the simplistic maze and the trial room.

Tom removed his cape dried by the torches, rolled it on itself and put it in his backpack. Whatever it was they needed to do here, a cape would only hinder them. He put his bag on his back again and went through the arch.

The room was gigantic. It was round with an old stone path going all the way around it. In the middle, another path meandered through a lava lake, from the arch to the back end. Between the two paths, an immense 30 square meters platform raised from the magma. In its center, a well. A well? It made this place kind of ironic. Finally, ancient pillar-like structures completed the central platform.

Above the lake, the air was dancing and the carbon monoxide started to make them feel dizzy.

“I guess we have to go to the center of the room,” assumed Tom.

“The path doesn’t seem very safe,” noted Noemi.

Tom jumped on it with both feet. Seeing that nothing moved, he gave her a broad smile, but Noemi gave him a dead stare.

“Don't do that.”

Tom turned around and crossed the first path that led to the well. Misty and Noemi followed, carefully walking in Tom’s footsteps. Once there, he couldn’t resist to take a peak in the tunnel.

At the bottom, a dot started to glow. It grew bigger and bigger. Seeing it was a fire column, Tom threw his head back just a second before the

geyser exploded out of the well.

A monster entirely made of flammes emerged out of it. It was muscular, wearing burning clothes and a horn was growing in the middle of its forehead.

“Who are you?” asked Tom.

“You got some nerve, kid. You invade my domain and you dare to ask who I am.”

“He’s Pyro,” explained Noemi. “The god that rules over the Fire ruins.

“What do you want from me?” inquired the god.

Misty stepped forward. “I want to become a goddess.”

Pyro studied her before bursting out laughing. Like a flame-thrower, an orange flame came out of his mouth. He calmed down after a few seconds.

“You are but a child. You think you can overcome all those trials?

“I'll take my chances. Do I have to fight you?”

“Don’t worry. Gods are forbidden from hurting a god in training. Hierarchy matter,” he specified. “Nonetheless, if you don’t have the strength to carry a goddess burden, your passion will be quite useless.”

“And how would I find that out?” asked Misty.

A heavy footstep made the whole room shake. Lava was waving in every direction and splashed on the platform's edge. Tom tried to locate the origin of the noise. His eyes followed the path behind the well. It led to another arch similar to the one they just crossed but bigger.

From the shadows, a huge lizard appeared. It was 20 meters long and it was crawling toward the group’s platform. The beast stopped behind Pyro.

Truth to be told, the lizard creeped out the girls. What was the matter with that desert? Why was there so many strange creatures living init? Where were the usual scorpions, snakes and spider?

“Do we have to kill it?” panicked Misty.

“If you feel up to it,” confirmed Pyro. “A god should be able to decide if they can kill or not. Rather if they have to kill or not. Sometimes, ultimatums force us to choose between two hard choices and we must have the courage to do something we don’t like.”

Tom grabbed his hazblades and transformed them right away.

“It doesn’t bother me.”

He raced to the lizard but was swiped right away by its tail. Tom had completely forgot about the beast's appendage. It was almost as long as its body and it cracked like a large whip.

“Tom!” worried Misty.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said while standing up. “It’s your trial so you have to kill it. Noemi and I can only assist.”

The monster made its way to the platform’s center. Its speed was somewhat repulsive. With each steps, it made the lava splash more. It turned around and swiped its tail again. Misty dived and Tom jumped above it.

She rolled under the tail and grabbed her boomerangs. She looked around. Tom was finally landing after his jump. He just vaulted five meters in the air and seemed as surprised as she was.

“What was that?” he asked.

Noemi joined them from the back. Somehow, she would rather walk along the platform’s edge than get close to the lizard.

“It’s your Ixcross,” she said. “It amplifies your strength.”

Tom remembered telling her about that when he described Vince’s attack.

He turned his attention to the fight and regretted the distraction right away. The lizard was charging head down, ready to push them in the lava lake behind them.

The three of them ran in different directions and the beast chased after Noemi. She started to shriek in panic. Tom thought he even saw her cry. He joined her and gave his first sword strike to the lizard’s flank.

The animal squealed painfully and shook its long green neck. While doing so, it violently hit Noemi. She flew through the air, bounced further away and hit her head on a rock. She slid on the platform and stopped a meter away from the edge.

“Noemi!” called Tom.

She didn’t answer. She was unconscious from the impact. This would prevent her from helping for the remaining of the fight.

Tom frowned and bared his teeth. The same thing happened while he was fighting the sandworms. The beast swiped its tail again. This time, Tom anchored his feet to the ground and raised his hazblades in front of his face. He was the only one that could protect Noemi and he wouldn’t let her die.

The tail hit his blades and Tom gave a violent vertical sharp blow. The swords cut through the flesh and blood stained the platform. As if Vince was in front of him, Tom’s rage was growing.

“You won’t touch her!”

Around him, the same thing that happened in Tamber and Terfie happened again. A grey light enveloped his body. The mildly translucent aura seemed to obey him.

Misty stopped moving to observe what was happening. In any case, Tom didn’t notice it yet, but in his head a large numbered meter was rolling like a ghost.

Tom jumped again with willpower. His Ixcross was acting like an engine, or maybe more like a cog that would activate when needed. He jumped three meters in the air and landed on the beast’s back.

Without hesitation, he stabbed his hazblades on each sides of the lizard’s backbone and ran toward its tail. The monster struggled and Tom lost his footing. He fell on the ground and let go of his hazblades. The dark green one spun toward the well while the white one slid at Misty’s feet. The sight of the sword reminded her of the role she had to play in this battle. Tom

was doing all of her work.

The monster's eyes showed exhaustion. It had lost a lot of blood thanks to Tom's five slashes. It staggered on the spot. All the heavy steps it was taking to stabilize itself caused he platform to crack. Around Noemi, the rock yield and she started to drift away.

Misty threw her boomerangs violently. They spun around and rammed in the lizard's neck. Once again, blood stained the floor. The weapons came back in her hands. The attack was vile, but it saved Tom from being trampled.

"Tom! Noemi…" she began.

Surrounded by his grey aura, he looked in turn at the monster, Misty and Noemi, still unconscious.

"Can you take care of it?" asked Tom.

She hesitated for a second, but nodded with confidence. For now, Noemi was their priority and Misty, as much as she wanted to deny it, didn't have the courage to walk on the lava lake. On top of this, it was her trial. Tom shouldn't do it for her.

He nodded back and jumped as hard as he could. He landed on a three meter drifting rock. The weight of the impact caused it to sink a few centimeters in the lava. Before it splashed him, Tom sank it deeper when he jumped again.

He made his way to the platform Noemi was on. Being bigger than the others, it didn't sink as much. He wrapped one arm behind her back and grabbed her beneath her knees with the other then held her close to his chest. He lifted his eyes toward the main platform and froze in surprise.

For a second he wondered if the carbon monoxide caused him to hallucinate. Misty had sheathed her boomerangs and was holding the white hazblade. She had cut down the beast's tail and was now hacking at its feet. Without hesitation, she sliced the tendons of the right one. It was an unusual sight, but it wasn't what surprised Tom. Misty was also surrounded by an

aura, but instead of being grey, it was pink. Also, the hazblade she was holding was different from his. The weapon had stretched into a bastard sword Misty had to wield with both arm. Despite it's size, the weight didn't seem to slow her down.

Unable to stand, the lizard tipped to the left and fell in the lava. A shriek filled the room's dancing air. By falling in the ocean of fire, it created a small tidal wave that shook the drifting rocks. Tom had to move!

He jumped on a closer platform in order to build momentum then leaped toward the sinking monster. He landed on it and, before it was completely submerged, jumped again toward the main platform. Tom looked at the distance he had to cover. Because of the lava, he could only take half a step before he leaped and his jump was too short: he wouldn't land on the rock but in lava.

As he was thinking, his toes landed on the platform but his and Noemi's weight made him capsize. Tom knew he was about to die and his heart skipped a beat. Thinking hard to find a solution, the only thing that came to his mind was to throw Noemi on the rocks to not carry her with him. He threw her and kept falling back toward the liquid hell, eyes tightly shut in fear.

Last second, a hand grabbed his shirt and dragged him back up. The adrenaline rush caused him to fall on top of his savior. He opened his eyes and saw Misty laying under him. They both had lost their aura, but the situation was still embarrassing.

"You won't die that easily," she said with a smile.

She was two centimeters away from his face. He could see every sweat drops caused by the effort and the heat. She just saved his life and the only thing he could think about was her sweat. He was ridiculous but she didn't ask him to move. She was looking at his brown eyes while catching her breath. Tom wanted to kiss her.

"Thank you," he articulated. "Sincerely".

She nodded slightly to tell him that it was okay. One of Tom's sweat drop landed on her forehead.

"Sorry."

He removed the drop with his thumb and removed a few of hers in the process. Seeing that it was becoming a bit too embarrassing, Tom removed himself then helped her stand up. He picked up his hazblades and made his way to Noemi.

"We should go, the lack of oxygen is starting to affect us," he said to Misty.

"Yes but first," she addressed Pyro, "I completed your trial."

The god of fire watched their every move.

"That's right," he conceded. "You overcame my trial. You are an interesting trainee."

"Interesting?" repeated Misty.

She seemed suspicious. While she was talking to the god, Tom took a handkerchief out of his bag and laid it on Noemi's face. He wanted to prevent her from breathing that polluted air. Even if the action seemed rather pointless, Tom hoped it would help for a few minutes.

"Yes, interesting," said Pyro. "You chose to save that half-elf instead of using your friend's talents in this fight. It could have prevented all those injuries you got."

That's when Tom noticed. Her elbows and knees were covered in blood and multiple bruises were coloring her skin.

"Of course!" said Misty, taking offence. "She's my best friend, I would choose them over that goddess status any time."

Pyro stretched a flame into a smile.

"That's what make you so interesting."

Misty didn't answer. Around her, everything froze. Only she and the god could move.

"What's happening?" she asked.

“You completed the first trial.”

A beam emanated from her heart. Like a projector, it was creating an exact copy of herself but translucent. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be sleeping peacefully. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes.

“My name is Chronexia,” she said.

“Chronexia?” repeated Misty. “You look exactly like me.”

“On the outside, yes. But on the inside I am your divine entity. I control all our powers and to free me you must complete all the challenges.”

“Does that make me a schizophrenic?” asked Misty.

“That’s one way of seeing things. Let me put it that way: we were both created when you were born and your role was to wake me up. By doing so, you will unlock my powers and be able to use them. You have access to all of them but the energy required to do so is much greater than what you have. Using them now could kill you, or us. I would advise you to only use slow time for now.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“That’s relative. We do not operate like human beings. A god cannot die from a disease or a fatal injury. The only thing that can kill us is if we run out of plasmic energy. If it reaches zero, we fade away. Right now, you are in-between, a demi-god if you will. So if you abuse your powers, you’ll die. If you take a fatal blow, you’ll die too.”

“I’ll just have to be careful,” concluded Misty.

Chronexia nodded and disappeared. Around her, the lava waves resumed their usual rolling and Tom started moving again. He joined her.

“Get your power and let’s go,” he said.

“It’s alright, I already have it… I’ll explain later,” she replied, seeing his puzzled look.

“This way is faster,” said Pyro.

The fire god pointed at the entrance from which the lizard came. Tom nodded, grateful, then ran in that direction. They had to get out of here

as fast as they could; the gas could kill them any minute.

The way Pyro showed them was by far easier to travel than the scenic route they took on their way in.

The floor was going up to the surface in a 20 degrees slope. When they got out, Tom noticed it was nighttime and that the rain had stopped. Did they really spend more than six hours in those ruins? Time flew by so quickly.

Tom looked around him. They were very far from the Ruin's entrance. He could still see it on the horizon but he estimated that it was more than 10 kilometers away.

He left Noemi under Misty's care and improvised a camp. He found some old dusty stumps and lit a quaint fire. He got a tent out of his backpack and settled Noemi inside. She was still breathing and it was all that mattered for now.

Tom was done eating and was playing with a stick in the fire. As soon as it was lit, he would burrow it in the sand. He looked sadly at the dancing flames while Misty was eating dried berries.

"Thanks a lot for saving me," he said again.

Like him, Misty stared at the fire. She smiled and shook her head.

"I should be the one thanking you. I couldn't have done it without you."

"It bothers me that we had to kill an innocent though."

"What do you mean?"

"That lizard didn't do anything to us. It was us – or rather I – who attacked."

Misty reviewed the scene in her head. Tom did attack the monster. It only defended itself. They were murderers… No. She killed it. She was the murderer. She was no better than Vince.

"Excuse me," she said, standing up.

Tom kept his eyes on her while she ran behind a steep dune. He frowned and got up. He checked on Noemi then went the same way as Misty.

From afar, he could hear her choking. He got a bit closer and sat on the other side of the dune. Close enough so that they could hear each other without raising their voice but far enough so that the sand would hide him. Since they left Tamber, he was so preoccupied with her that an expression of sadness and worry almost never left his face. It didn't take a genius to realize that she was throwing up.

"Please Tom, leave me alone," she pleaded between two retches.

Tom waited for a few seconds.

"You don't like it… the killing. Don't you?"

She didn't answer. She needed to get ahold of herself. She couldn't let such small things discourage her.

"No," she confessed.

Her eyes were still full of tears. Tom wasn't looking at her but her voice betrayed her. He could feel she had enough.

"You always put your trust in me," he said. "It's more than everything I ever hoped for. As long as you trust me, I swear that nothing will happen to you. It's not a vow, it's a fact. If you can't kill someone who has to die, I'll do it for you. I won't let anything happen to you or Noemi."

Once again silence fell for a few seconds. Both of them could tell that those seconds of calm were necessary.

"Thanks Tom. You're a very good friend."

He forced a smile. Even with the sand between them, he didn't want her to know he was crying.

"A good friend? You know I would sacrifice everything for you. If you need me, just call my name. Anytime i'll rise to the occasion; you can count on it."

He stood up and headed back to the fire. On the other side of the dune, Misty wasn't throwing up anymore. Only her tears were soaking thesand now.

"I wish I could tell you more than that Tom. You are my reason for

living. I've been in love with you forever, but now it's the least of your concerns… Isn't it?"

Chapter 5:
Apocalypse!

Three days flew by in the desert since that famous night when the first seal had been unlocked. Noemi regained consciousness the next morning and Misty explained in details what had happen when everything was paused, things they couldn't witness. Noemi found this interesting, but Tom was suspicious. He didn't really like the fact another being could be inside Misty's body.

Now, they were advancing on a green path that weaved in the heart of a mountain. They had left the desert three hours ago, and were climbing the peak to reach Porttow, a small village on the other side of the mountain, renowned for its numerous ferries.

"What are we doing again?" asked Tom once more.

Three days had passed since they established their plan of action. He had forgotten about it, typical of him, but repeating it made the idea clearer at the same time.

"We had the choice between completing the seal challenges and trying to save the rest of the Elite members. For now, it's more urgent to protect the others," explained Misty. "The seals can wait. Conclusion, between Secretia and Edanqua, Secretia is closer from our location, therefore this is where we are going…"

Misty suddenly became silent. Tom followed her gaze. In front of them was a man in his mid-twenties collapsed on the ground. He was surrounded by the same imps Tom had eliminated when he jumped out of the window in Terfie.

Tom grabbed his hazblades, and transformed them in swords.

Immediately, the imps noticed their presence. Knowing they had been detected, they vanished in smoke. Tom came up to the man, and kneeled by his side.

“I hate those gremlins,” he thought.

Tom put his weapons to his hips. He was still looking where the little monsters had vanished, and sighed. Tom shook the man softly, to avoid injuring him.

“Can you hear me?”

Tom didn’t insist. His body was covered by cuts and he seemed dehydrated. Misty looked at her best friend and asked her to heal him. Without delay, she healed the cuts like she did after the fight between Tom and the mercenary. Maybe her endurance was progressing quickly, or maybe the cuts were minor, but in less than two minutes she had corrected the problem.

The man opened his eyes. Above him was the gloomy head of Tom, who looked at the two girls with an air of disapproval.

“We can’t stop and heal every single person that crosses our path,” he said. “We will never stop Vince if we do.”

“Oh, please. We aren't going to let people die in front of us,” sympathized Misty. “I thought we wanted to save them?”

Tom growled. Successively, the man looked at them. He sat down to stand up with more ease.

“Vince?” he asked. “The one, who goes around and captures the members of the elite?”

“You know him?” replied Tom.

“Yes, well no, not personally. But he attacked my master, Socrate Crescent, a few days ago.”

Tom got even angrier, against the man and against himself. Not being present for the attack was disgusting him. In Tamber andz in Terfie, he had failed, but his conscience was at peace because he had at least tried to

interrupt Vince's plan.

"What happened?" asked Misty interested.

"A day like any other," he explained. "I went to train with my master when the floating character attacked us. He beat me and captured him in a green bubble. He said that I was pathetic and that he was regretting the lack of presence of a certain Tom."

His voice became sad. Tom could see in his eyes that he was reliving the scene.

"He disappeared saying his next target was in Terfie. That's why, I packed my bags in Amiro and headed there. I was ambushed on this road, but I thank you for saving me. Now, please forgive me, but I need to reach Terfie. I need to squeeze information out of this Vince."

The man walked toward Tom and pushed him out of his path. Tom didn't resist, but seeing the man wasn't stopping, he told him about Flora and Aleck.

"Going there will be useless. He already has what he wanted. His next targets are in Secretia and in Edanqua."

The man stopped and turned around; this time he seemed angry. Tom quickly studied him. He was clothed in yellow from top to bottom. A garish kind of yellow similar to the feathers of a canary. He had boots and gloves made of brown leather, a black shirt, long pants and a vest in the same canary yellow. Two red lines had been stitched on the hem and were more or less used as a zipper. He had brown hair, cut very short.

Above his glove, an orange ball of plasma started to inflate. Tom put his hand to his hazblades, pulled on them and they transformed in his usual weapons. The man wasn't friendly and Tom had sworn to never lose like a novice again.

The energy ball reached the size of a grapefruit. Its owner raised his arm and threw the ball at Tom. He looked behind him. Noemi was too close. Without precaution, he pushed her in the grass. She stumbled a little and fell

to the ground. Tom raised his sword, leaned to the left and sliced the energy ball with his blade.

The plasma sphere split in two and continued a few centimeters behind Tom. The man smiled maliciously. Tom eye's widened out of stupefaction. Behind him, an explosion resounded, and propelled him to the ground.

“You're working for him, isn’t it?” he suspected. “Vince wants to delay me, so I won’t get there in time.”

“You’re joking, right?” Tom said losing his temper. “Do not associate us with that vermin.”

Tom got up promptly. His swords in hands, he assaulted the man they had just healed. Tom swung one of his swords, which was dodged, and immediately followed by the second one. His opponent grabbed him by the wrist, spun him and grappled him in an arm lock, which forced Tom to drop his hazblade.

“You won’t trap me so easily.”

Tom gave a violent head-butt behind him. He hit the man's forehead and forced him to release Tom who grabbed his sword off the ground and rushed to the man, who was stumbling while backing up.

Everything around them slowed down; time had almost stopped. Tom, who was running, was going about as fast as a little boy blindly searching for his glasses. Misty, who stayed at real speed, moved behind the man, and armlocked him in such a way that he couldn’t move.

After a few seconds, time returned to its normal speed. Tom lost his footing, but regained his balance before falling.

“Stop your childishness,” she ordered.

Tom and the man calmed down immediately. It was probably one of the first times Tom had seen Misty being so serious. He felt almost shameful.

“I will release you now,” she said to the man. “Promise me not to attack us again.”

“Understood,” he replied.

Misty released his arms, freeing him. He advanced a few steps, while massaging his wrists. He looked again at all three of them successively. Noemi, still on the ground after being pushed by Tom, slowly got up. Tom kept his hand on his hazblades in case the man wanted to assault them again. Misty walked closer to him.

“What’s your name?” she asked

“Nark Shin,” he calmly replied.

A spark lit in the mind of Tom. This name, he had heard it in his dream. Vince told him that he fought against him. His story was making sense.

“Oh well, Nark,” explained Noemi, while dusting off. “I can assure you, we are not with Vince. He captured Tom’s parents and mine. He also killed Misty's. We are trying to find him, like you, but he slips out of our grasp every time.”

“I’ll get him in Secretia,” mentioned Tom to Misty. “Our information is leading us to there,” he added for Nark. “You do as you wish.”

Tom sheathed his hazblades and shrugged. He took Noemi with him, and hurried Misty to go. She saluted Nark with the back of her hand and followed Tom and Noemi.

“Wait,” said Nark.

He ran to join them.

“I’m sorry. It’s very hard to thrust people in this world. You're Tom Watson, isn’t it?”

“I am,” affirmed Tom.

“Vince mentioned fighting someone bearing this name, I presume it’s you.”

Tom nodded. He didn’t hold this person close to his heart for now. His surprise attack could have injured Noemi. Gladly, his reflex protected her and Misty reacted quickly enough.

“Can I join you on your journey?” he asked with shame. “We have the same goal and I’m somewhat strong.”

“Not enough to stop Vince from capturing Socrate.”

“Tom!” disapproved Misty

A nervous spasm made his eyelid twitch. This sentence was a cheap shot and seemed to have affected him psychologically. Tom quickly and vaguely apologized to him.

“We could gladly use your help,” affirmed Misty. “You seem to have an unusual capacity.”

“You mean this?”

Nark inflated an orange energy ball, identical to the one he had thrown at Tom in their fight. Misty nodded. It was exactly what she meant.

“Yes, it’s my master Socrate who taught me,” he proudly replied. “You need to take energy from your body, and transfer it outside. However, there’s a downside to this technique. The more I use it, the quicker I get exhausted. That's why I rarely use it. I prefer hand to hand combat.”

Nark continued his various explanations about the way he fights. In fact, he was mostly answering Misty’s questions while Tom was grumbling in his corner. In front of them, Noemi was silently leading the march. Misty and Nark were now on the first name terms, which was greatly irritating Tom.

It was almost five o’clock, and Noemi had still not asked for a break. Going down the flank of the mountain was greatly facilitating the march, compared to climbing it. If Tom’s calculation were right, they would reach Porttow in about four hours. They’d be able to sleep at an inn instead of camping like they did for the past three days.

“How do you know each other?” asked Nark.

“Tom and I are childhood friends and Noemi is my best friend as well as Tom’s aunt.”

Tom raised his eyes to the sky. It was sundown, giving a pink tint to the clouds.

“That was me,” replied Misty. “I’m a goddess in training, and I can control time.”

Nark's eyes widened in shock. For the next hour, Misty took the opportunity to explain everything she knew about her new status. Tom also heard some fragments of fictive story she had added to put more sensationalism and other parts she completely omitted, like the scene where she saved his life, and he landed on top of her.

He wanted to mention it, but Misty didn't seem to take any breath between each sentence, and before he could mention the event, they were on another topic. Tom found they were getting along too well, for people who had just met.

“Noemi's not very chatty,” noted Nark.

“No,” replied Misty. “She doesn’t get along well with humans, because of her half-elf blood.”

Their “update conversation”, as Tom liked to call it, painfully continued until they reached the entrance of Porttow, at nine o’clock. Tom could finally enjoy the silence. At the entrance of the village, two wooden pieces were holding a sign with Porttow written on it. Tom looked around him. The city was divided in two parts: there was a harbor to the east while the west was a commercial zone.

Hoping to separate them, Tom divided the team in two. He sent Noemi and Misty to reserve a room at the inn, while he and Nark would take care of the ship for their trip on the following day.

Without too much opposition, Misty accepted, and brought Noemi with her. Tom advanced, and took a look at the different scheduled departures at the docks. After a little while, they found one that matched their criteria. They were leaving at nine in the morning, and were going directly to Secretia.

Tom went to the boat to pay the captain in advance.

“Five gold coins for all of us?” asked Tom. “That's fairly cheap.”

“The travel distance isn’t that long” explained Nark. “Two hours will suffice to get us across. That’s the value of the trip.”

Tom concluded the agreement with the captain and exited the boat. He went down to the pier and walked toward the inn, where they chose to regroup. Nark followed him slowly, the question he asked Tom forced him to stop.

“Is Misty your girlfriend?”

“That's none of your business,” spat Tom.

“Turns out, I kind of like her”

Tom had a quick smile filled with pity for him. He slowly shook his head, left to right.

“You don’t even know anything about her.”

He turned toward Nark, Tom's smile became sadistic. The compassionate attitude he demonstrated a second earlier had transformed in a modest hatred.

“You’re all the same; you’re only interested in her appearance.”

Nark seemed amused. Tom's sudden anger wasn’t a threat at all for him. He approached Tom and put his hand on his shoulder. He let out a sound between a sigh and a laugh.

“Just answer my question,” said Nark. “Is she your girlfriend or not?”

“Not yet,” growled Tom.

Despite his anger, sadness troubled his answer. He looked at the wooden pier hoping to avoid his gaze.

“Thanks,” concluded Nark. “You know, I would really like to be friends with you in spite of everything.”

“It will be impossible for me to be your friend, as long as you show interest in Misty.”

“I’m not an idiot, Tom. If I told her now, I wouldn’t have a chance. Make sure she falls in love with you before i do. Meanwhile, this doesn’t stop us from being friends. Don’t forget, Vince remains our principal objective.”

Nark was right. He may be interested in Misty, but Tom had a good lead. Nark couldn't steal the decade they had spent together. And if Nark made any mistakes, he could benefit from them.

"Yes," conceded Tom

"Come on, let's go," said Nark

He passed his arm around Tom's neck and smiled, showing all his teeth to him. Tom found he had a strange behaviour for someone who claimed not to thrust others, he had quickly gotten accustomed to their little group. With some difficulties, Tom admitted to himself that except for this love rivalry, he kind of liked the fighter.

When they reached the inn, they took the key left by Misty at the reception. They were in room number nine and the room number eight was taken by the girls. Obviously, Misty and Noemi would rather have their own room, and there were only two beds per room. When Tom arrived in his, he chose the bed in the back, near the window, which faced the beach and docks. Knowing that both girls were already be in bed, Tom imitated them and fell asleep without much difficulty. Nark installed himself at a desk to write some notes, while waiting to get sleepy. Seeing that it wasn't working, he decided to take a walk in town.

While strolling around on the docks, he reached the last one and sat down. After a few minutes, the wood planks cracked behind him. Nark turned his head towards the source of the noise. He saw Misty wearing a light blue night gown, she had her hair down and wasn't wearing any shoes.

"You're not sleeping?" she friendly asked.

He shook his head, and brought his gaze back to the water, where the moon was being reflected. Misty walked toward him and sat on his right. The silence lasted for a good minute, before Nark asked her a question, out of curiosity.

"How did you and Tom meet?"

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A little five years old girl was running in a house. Behind her, her pink hair was floating at the rhythm of her pace and sometimes bouncing on her thick blue glasses. In her small hands, she held a half full brown leather pouch.

The girl reached a desk, and grabbed a bunch of sheet. She added a few pens to her pouch and was ready to conquer a bookshelf, which she then climbed; the book she wanted was at the top.

An enormous hand grabbed her by the collar of her small pink dress. She gasped, and struggled for a moment. The grip made her turn around like a dog being punished. A man in his thirties was easily holding her at arms' length. His eyes looked dead, like his flat blond hair.

"What are you doing Misty?" asked the man.

"Tomorrow, I'm starting school!" happily exclaimed the girl.

"I already told you, we're still talking about it…"

A red haired women came out of the kitchen, she was holding a porcelain plate that she was drying with a white cloth. Just like her daughter, her hair had a slight pink tint.

"Oh please, Howard," said the woman. "I thought we had agreed on this last week. If you don't let her go, she won't learn anything."

"She already knows how to read, and write," he protested.

"Of course, she's confined in this house twenty four hours a day. You won't let her go out, and play with other children her age. What else do you want her to do?"

"Jessye," he growled.

His tone had raised enough to scare her, but she stood still. He put Misty down, and took out a silver flask. He swallowed its content and sighed. He looked at Misty and then kneeled down to her level.

"Okay, I have a deal for you."

The alcohol in his breath made the girl's nose curl. Her glasses jumped on her face. She shook her head before advancing, interested.

“Which one?”

“I let you go to school, under the only condition that you do not speak to any boys.”

Misty quickly thought, index on her chin, eyes glued to the ceiling above her glasses. This was reducing the friend circle possibilities, but it was better than staying locked up in the house alone.

“Deal! I won’t talk with any boys.”

Jessye sighed, and return to her dishes. Howard smiled, and patted Misty's head. When he got back up, he took the book she was trying to grab, and dropped it in her back pack.

“Thank you!” she said with a big smile.

Misty closed her bag and rushed towards the stairs. She climbed one more step and locked herself in her room. That night, Misty went to sleep very early. Her eagerness for the next day made her toss and turn for a few hours and, after making her bed a third time, she finally fell asleep.

A knock on the door woke her up suddenly; her mom entered the room, and opened the curtains adorning her room’s windows.

“Get up,” she told her. “If you want to get to school, you have twenty minutes.”

Misty jumped out of bed. She put on a pink skirt, and changed her white night camisole for an emerald green vest with white vines patterns. She grabbed her back pack, and hurried to the stairs that she quickly climbed down before rushing outside. She ran toward the village for five minutes, slowed down then completely stopped. Two reason forced her to abandon her race: first, she lacked endurance and was too out of breath to keep running after a few hundred steps; the second was because she has no idea where the school was located. No one had told her.

Misty turned her head on every side. She was now in the town’s center and had ended up at a four lanes intersection. She was lost. Tears were starting to fill her eyes. She panicked, and started to cry. She stopped moving

and inside, she hoped someone would take pity on her.

Her strategy worked. A few second later, a bystander approached her, and kneeled to the ground to get to her level. On his head, he was wearing a straw hat. He took a childish voice and asked her what the problem was.

“I can't find the school,” she wept.

“Ah! That’s easy,” continued the bystander on the same tone. “You only have to follow this road, and it will be near the exit of the village. It’s a big house made of wood.”

While explaining, the man was gesturing wildly. In a sense, Misty thought he was reassuring.

“Thank you,” she said with a hiccup.

She dried her eyes, readjusted her glasses, and continued her way on the path indicated. The bystander looked at her leave with a smile. A woman crossed the girls path and approached the man who had just helped her. Like Misty’s mother, she had red hair.

“Are you coming Achille?” asked the woman to the bystander.

He removed his straw hat and smiled to the woman. He spoke with his regular voice.

“Yes, have you already dropped Tom?”

The woman nodded.

“Let’s hope that he won’t cause too much trouble to Flora. She just came back from a long maternity leave.”

“I’m more worried about Aleck. I’m afraid that he'll drop my half-sister as soon as he’ll take her. She’s only three years old.”

The woman gave him an angry look while they were going back home. On their way, a veil of sadness covered his eyes. It's been three years now. And for three years, the same scene had haunted him. He will find him, he swore he would.

Behind them, Misty had finally reached the school entrance. She

would have ventured inside if only the three girls in front of her had allowed her to.

The three girls were standing at the entrance and were deliberately blocking her way. With a glimpse, Misty could guess they were about five or six years older than her.

The one in the centre forced a piercing laugh; the type of laughter that makes you want to hit its source. Her blond curly hair was acting like a curtain, hiding a long and oval face. Her attitude gave the impression she was leading the trio.

“You’re way too young to come here. Who gave you the right to come?”

“My dad,” answered Misty naively.

Again the same laugh pierced Misty’s eardrum.

“Go on, disappear!” replied the chief.

She closed her eyes and brushed the air with her hand. On her left, a more corpulent girl advanced toward her and shoved Misty who lost balance and fell on her back. For the second time in the same day, her eyes got wet. Her lower lip started to quiver. She was about to cry again, but stopped suddenly.

A small boy slightly taller than her appeared between her and the three bullies. His brown hair was floating in the morning wind. In his hands, he held two small wooden swords. They were only toys, but being struck with sticks like those would be painful, especially for children.

Misty felt that he had appeared in a fraction of a second. He was holding his first sword below the throat of the corpulent girl and the other pointed at the chief. The small boy seemed really angry. Maybe he had had problems with them in the past.

“Leave her alone Sarah!”

The blond frowned, and growled. With a boastful sigh, she turned her heels, and entered the school. The one with the sword below her neck

hesitated a moment before moving. When the chief called her, she backed out and followed her.

The small boy put away his swords in his improvised sheaths and turned toward Misty, who hadn't moved yet. He bent over her, and handed over a handkerchief. She took it unwillingly, while he was giving her his prettiest smile. Misty noted that he was missing a canine. She dried her eyes with the piece of cloth. Without waiting for her to give it back, he got up, and walked to the school. At the same moment, the bell rung, indicating the beginning of classes.

Misty got up and entered the school. In the main corridor, there was only one alley, which lead to a common area. Misty observed the arrangement of the room. Five windows were located on the right wall. On the floor, two chalk drawings had been made by the kids. In front, a black board and a table were placed for the teachers. In the whole room, Misty counted six desks for the students. Their length allowed two students per desk.

While observing each desk, Misty located the same boy sitting on the last one. He was alone while everyone else was already in pair. Being the only available place, Misty had no choice, but to sit there. She sat on the left, and took out her papers and pens from her dusty bag.

The small boy turned his head towards her and gave her the same big smile.

"My name is Tom Watson. And you, what is your name?"

"I can't answer you," replied Misty. "I promised my dad that I wouldn't speak with boys."

"So what?" he said. "I'm not a boy."

"You're not?" asked Misty surprised.

"No. I'm a male swordsman, it's different. Boys plays with marble balls, I train to become really really strong."

Misty thought a moment about what he said and her promise to her

dad. If he wasn't a boy, therefore she could talk to him, right?

"Misty," She replied. "I'm Misty Trachtenberg."

"Trach...," Tried Tom while focussing intensively. "Trache..., Trak... Misty, it'll be!"

Misty burst out laughing. Her laugh was tinkling and angelic. She gave him a broad smile. The sight of this amused child made Tom blush. He chose to change the subject, before she could realize it.

"Can I try on your glasses?" eagerly asked Tom.

Misty blinked. She didn't oppose to it. She removed her glasses and lent them to him. Before putting them on, Tom fixed his gaze upon her face.

"You're a lot prettier without them. Can you still see?"

"Yes. They are only for reading and, since I'm always reading, I never take them off."

"You should," said Tom, while putting them on. "How do I look?"

"You're weird," admitted Misty with the same smile.

Tom laughed, and gave them back. He cackled and even snorted at the end. At the same moment, a lady with silver hair entered the classroom with a majestic pace.

"Good day," she said to the children. "I am the professor Flora. I left my position last year due to a lengthy maternity leave, but I am back now and I will be spending the next few years with you. Let's begin."

Tom laughed another time and stretched.

"The next few years will be easy; she's a friend of my dad."

"I don't think that'll change anything," replied Misty.

She put back her glasses to read the notes written by the teacher on the board. She transcribed word by word every sentences, and even added notes on the side to understand better. To her right, Tom passed most of his time eyes glued to the ceiling imagining things. On his sheet of paper were some graffiti. Paying more attention to them, Misty recognized a quickly drawn character executing a movement, with what seemed to be swords.

At noon, the students could go out for lunch but in her rush to leavefor school, she forgot to pack herself one. While waiting for the return of class, she sat under a tree beside a bench and held her stomach to quench the pain. Arms around her legs and eyes shut, she waited for the beginning of class.

“You’re under our tree” told her a voice.

Misty opened her eyes to see the three same bullies she had met the same this morning. From a conversation she had with Tom, she knew that Sarah was the blond, Stephany was the one who shoved her and the third one was Sindy.

Misty didn’t know what to do. Honestly, those three girls were inspiring some kind of fear in her. Tom appeared beside the three. He probably went to grab his lunch before eating it. In one hand, he was holding a little white bag, with the other he pulled on the handle of his weapon, just enough to make them understand that he was still ready to fight if they weren’t leaving her alone.

“He won’t always be there to protect you, believe me,” grumbled Sarah.

They left without a word, and Tom sat on the bench. From the white bag, he took out a sandwich. He split it in half, and gave Misty the first half, which she accepted with an exaggerated politeness. Seeing that he was too busy eating, she asked a question that intrigued her:

“Why are they afraid of you?”

“Because I’m stronger than them,” he replied with his mouth full.

“Do you think you can help me become as strong as you?”

Seeing her innocent smile, Tom approved with a nod. To be honest, he had already fell under the charms of the young girl with pink hair since the moment he laid eyes on her.

“Wonderful! Can you show me tonight after class?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” friendlily replied Tom.

He had raised his eyes toward the sky to scroll through an invisible schedule before approving with a vigorous nod.

Classes started again, but Misty couldn't stop thinking about the upcoming training. After some time, which she felt was never-ending, a bell rang. It was finally three o'clock, which left the mark drawn on the floor completely useless. They let the other students leave first then walked toward the school's backyard.

The boy climbed on a decorative rock to give himself some importance and wondered where to begin.

"For starters," he began, "You need, uh, a weapon"

While looking in the school yard, Misty searched for some kind of weapon. Finding only two boomerangs in a sandbox, she took them and returned to Tom.

"Alright, I got them," she said brandishing the two toys.

"Well, now you must learn to strike with them, like this," he says. Tom executed a few quick movement with his wooden swords. They were hardly close to definition of the word "strike", but Misty understood the core of it.

"You must try to hit the bad guys without being hit back. That's my therory."

"Theory?" she corrected.

"Yes, that's what I said. Therory. If others are stronger than you, it'll hurt; otherwise it's the other way around. Therefore, to avoid being hurt, you must be the strongest."

After this moment of philosophy, Tom resumed his training, and Misty followed him from the corner of her eyes. Obviously, he was way ahead of her. At five o'clock, both children left their separate way. Misty hid her boomerangs in a safe location to make sure no one would take them and went home. As expected, her father was waiting for her with many questions. Even if, like Tom, she didn't define him as a boy, Misty took care of avoiding

mentioning his existence. She lied on the exact time at which class finishedand talked only about the content provided by the teacher.

The training continued like this, days after days, making her stronger and stronger. All in hope of defeating the three brutes during their next encounter. But to Misty's great misfortune, this encounter never came. When she reached 12 years old, the three S – nickname kindly given to them by Misty – entirely disappeared from her life, finally leaving her alone with Tom and her new 10 year old friend, Noemi. Now, the daily two hours had become a routine respected by all of them.

Tom used it mainly to train, Misty often imitated him, but Noemi took this opportunity to read and learn new healing spells, which could become useful.

It was only two years later that Tom met Howard for the first time. Immediately Misty's father had demonstrated bitterness toward him. He profoundly hated his parents and now their son was hanging around his daughter?

When Tom picked up Misty to go to school one morning, the man violently slammed the door to his face.

"Your dad's great," said Tom, when she opened the door.

"Not really," replied Misty.

***

Nark was listening closely to the story, which lasted about an hour. When Misty finished, she thought about the time and found it ridiculous that she was still not sleeping. She got up and started her way back to the inn.

"So you and Tom became friend because you were being bullied?"

"Yeah... Tom has always been there for me, no matter what. He's always ready to give his life for me, if it could make me somewhat happy."

Misty turned toward Nark. She had closed her eyes, but tears had attached themselves onto her eye lashes. Her head tilted, she was smiling the most innocently possible.

“He's really someone wonderful.”

Nark nodded. Without further delay, Misty returned to the Inn. Nark stayed to look at the ocean a few more minutes.

“Well I guess that's a deadend…”

Tom got up the next day at eight o’clock. He didn’t want to miss their ship. Despite all their sidequests, if they delayed too much, Vince would go on without them. In the other bed, Nark was peacefully sleeping. Tom hesitated for a moment. He wondered if he should wake him up or not. Letting him sleep would force Misty to wake him in his place, which didn't benefit him the slightest. As morning politeness, Tom chose a different style of alarm clock: a pillow to the face.

Nark let out a groan of pain out, but didn’t hold a grudge against Tom. He really wanted to become his friend. He never had any, so he was doing everything to keep Tom on his good side.

Tom didn’t start a conversation. He didn’t want him as an enemy, but for now he was only seeing him as a rival. He got out of the room and went knocking on the door of room number eight.

Misty opened the door while rubbing her eyes. She was still wearing her blue nightgown.

“Let’s go. It would be nice to not get there at the last minute for once.”

Misty approved. Thirty minutes later, she and Noemi were clothed, and everyone had already eaten. They left the inn, and climbed aboard the ship. For the cruise, Tom didn’t rent a cabin, since the crossing was only two hours long. They had to stay on the deck. Tom leaned his elbows against the ship’s rampart.

Time passed by slowly, but nine o’clock finally arrived. The ship lifted its anchor and set sail. On the pier, a weird character caught Tom's attention.

He was wearing a red and black kimono and metallic boots. To his

hip, like any other mercenary who respected himself, hun g a gigantic sword that could be wielded with one or two hands. Most would have been scared by this weapon, but everyone around him seemed to focus on his hair: he had grown a long pure white mane. His hair reached his lower back and seemed extremely silky.

"An elf? He missed the boat anyways," smiled diabolically Tom.

Tom turned around, but kept looking at the stranger. For some reason, despite the fact that he saw the ship departing, he still advanced on the empty pier. Tom continued observing him. He could swear that the man was calculating the distance between them. At a glance, the distance must have been more or less 15 meters.

And, without notice, the mercenary jumped from the pier. If the jump of five meters that Tom did at the fire seal was powerful, this one was completely absurd and exaggerated. That man in his early twenties almost flew in the sky, and like it was nothing, landed on the top of the main mast.

The impact shook the boat like a cannon ball. The stranger climbed down on the transversal wooden beam which held the sails together, and sat there, his back to the mast. He was letting his right leg hang to the wind.

"Captain!" called a sailor. "We have a stowaway."

The same old man with the black curly beard who traded with Tom came out of his cabin. He walked closer to the character, and raised his voice to be heard.

"Oy! We don't offer free rides! Either you pay or you swim!"

The stranger, who was looking at the sky, laid his eyes on the captain. He sighed, while lightly shaking his head. He let two gold piece fall from his pocket. The captain picked them up, and didn't bother him again.

One by one, the stranger looked at each passenger. Tom noticed he had yellow eyes and slit pupils. His gaze crossed Tom's.

"*Show-off,"* thought Tom.

"*Mind your own business kid"* replied the man.

For the first time since Misty, Tom was able to understand someone simply by exchanging a look. They didn't talk, but both understood each other. Tom turned his head, insulted.

The stranger continued his round and his sight stopped on Noemi for a few seconds. He frowned, vexed, but didn't do anything.

One hour and half on their trip had passed. Tom was looking at the clouds, Nark was still talking with Misty and Noemi stayed up to feed the fishes. She was waiting to reach the next pier. The shyness caused by the presence of so many individuals on the deck caused her to keep her distance during the entire trip.

Far ahead, Secretia's pier appeared. The captain lined his ship in that direction, when another sailor called him in panic.

"Pirates Captain! They are coming straight at us!"

The captain grumbled, bothered.

"All passenger reach your cabins."

"Finally some action," smiled Tom.

From his hips, he pulled on his hazblades. They changed in swords, while Misty and Nark rushed to him.

"We are going to help them push those pirates back," said Tom. "Are you with me?"

"Of course," replied Misty. "Any reason is good to practice my handling of time."

"I'll show you what I'm really worth," said Nark.

He pulled on his brown gloves to tighten them further on his hands. Without warning, he violently clapped his palms together, before spacing them. In the middle, an orange sphere inflated like a balloon. Nark activated his movement, and the bomb grew even bigger. The pirate ship was getting closer. While Nark was preparing his offense, Tom ran toward the passenger cabin, and jumped on the roof. With the momentum, he continued and jumped on the transversal mast, where the stranger was sitting for the trip.

Without looking, he started talking to him.

“What’s your name?” asked Tom

“None of your concern, kid.”

Tom frowned. He could skip the formality. For now, he needed to protect the ship, and he had the perfect description of a mercenary.

“Do you intend on helping us?”

“This isn’t my ship,” he answered.

Tom, annoyed, sighed through his teeth. He jumped down the mast joining Misty and Nark. His legs took the 10 meters fall pretty well. The bomb charged by Nark had reached a diameter of two meters. Discharges of mana were gushing out of it like electricity.

“Stay away from its trajectory,” said Nark.

Without warning, he tackled his two hands behind the sphere. It took off with violence and crashed in the pirate ship. The wood exploded in its passage. It rolled on the pirate ship’s deck and created a massive explosion in the water. The damages were considerable, but the control was linear and the creation time was too long. Nark wouldn’t have time to prepare a second one. Furthermore, this attack seemed to have considerably drained him.

At that moment, the pirates started to board the ship. Misty slowed time, but to her surprise, her capacity to control it was much more limited than she had thought. Slowing time was also slowing everyone on her side, result: she was the only one moving at an accelerated level. Furthermore, her energy reserve didn’t allow her to use this technique for more than thirty continuous seconds. During that period, she was able to push some pirates in the water, but their number was still considerable. She was exhausted as if she had just ran several kilometers.

Tom threw himself to the floor to avoid a cannonball. He got up, and attacked a pirate. He blocked a sword with his white hazblade, and slashed the man's chest with the other. With a kick, he pushed him in the water. To the right, Nark imitated him with his fist and feet. Despite his exhaustion, he

had a good willpower to fight and win.

A commotion started to shake the pirate ship. The floor of the deck exploded and a gigantic golem suddenly rose from the rubbles. He landed on the ferry and searched for targets to eliminate.

On its wrists were hanging broken chains as if it had been detained by force in the hold of the barbarian ship. Someone must have freed him. Having no one in its sight, it started to destroy the boat. Hoping to stop it, Tom jumped on it and attacked it with his blades. His hazblade slid on the rock creating sparks.

The golem pushed him back with a punch in the stomach. The strike wasn't violent, but it was enough to propel Tom to the rampart.

Misty couldn't do anything against it. She was too tired to use time deceleration and her boomerang wouldn't do a scratch on the rock. Only Nark could have pushed him back, but just like Misty, he had reached his limit. A knee to the ground, he tried to get up without success.

Tom cursed. He got up another time. Like in the Fire ruins, a grey aura surrounded his body. He refused to lose again. He walked toward the golem, who was charging its fist. He shot it at Tom, but stopped halfway through. Tom had crossed his hazblades to protect himself. An electric spark emanated from them when they came in contact with the rock, but Tom had no time to give it any attention.

In front of him, the golem just exploded in a red light. The stranger from the mast was behind it, his sword touching the ground as if he had just finished an assault. A bent knee, the other leg on the floor, Tom could tell the attack had been a heavy one.

"Amateur," he said to Tom.

He raised his heavy sword from the ground, and put it over his shoulder. On the other side, his left hand was hanging from uselessness. He turned his back to them and was about to set off again.

"Wait," said Misty. "You could be of use to us if you join us!"

The man smiled.

“You are of no interest at all to me,” he replied. “I’m searching for people. Instead of trying to recruit new members, you should try to keep those you already have.”

With his free hand, he pointed toward Noemi behind them. A pirate had grabbed her by the shoulders, but she wasn’t resisting.

“Captain! I have a hostage!” yelled the pirate.

“Huh?” said Noemi.

The look of the half-elf changed. She had been wearing a friendly smile for the whole duration of the invasion, but it had changed to a look of madness. The hatred and rage that she had accumulated since the capture of her parents erupted in a single word.

“Apocalypse!”

The stranger from the mast cursed, panicked. Without waiting, he turned on his heels and left the ship. At the same time everything exploded. From Noemi emanated a powerful shockwave destroying everything around her. The pirate in front of her disintegrated completely in a fraction of a second. The boat on which they were, flew into wooden pieces. The mast exploded and collapsed. The sail it was holding was torn to shreds.

Nark threw himself behind a metal box. As soon has the attack passed over it, the metal twisted and dented. Tom had been covered by Misty. Being farther from Noemi than the pirate, the concentration of the attack had greatly dissipated, but still managed to stun Misty and lacerate her back. She lost balance and fell overboard.

“Misty!” yelled Tom

Tom barely grabbed her arm, but didn’t have the grip and support to retain her.

“Nark! I’m letting you take care of Noemi!”

From the moment she triggered her attack, Noemi had lost consciousness. The devastating attack had broken the deck in two and caused

the enchantress to fall in the ruins of the boat.

Nark didn't need to respond. He had already jumped in the heart of the wreckage to rescue the half-elf.

Tom tried to bring back Misty in the sinking ship, but his weight and the inclination of the boat made him fall with her. While falling, Tom grabbed Misty's head and held her tight against his neck to protect her. He had placed his other hand in her back to make sure she stayed close to him.

He crashed in the water head first. Water was infiltrating his ears, but for now, he didn't care. With all his strength, Tom flapped his legs in the water to propel them to the surface. Air was lacking, and Misty couldn't really retain her breath under water while being unconscious.

"*Why did she save me? Once more I didn't anticipate anything and its Misty who suffers the consequences!*"

Tom finally reached the surface. The water around them was slowly turning red.

"Don't worry," said Tom. "Everything'll be alright, Misty. I won't allow you to die!"

The grey aura around Tom exploded. With all of his strength, he pulled Misty toward the pier of Secretia. They were only 500 meters away. It was close... very close... Tom sunk in the water.

Another grey glare shook the ocean. Tom climbed to the surface again. He was crying of rage, love and will to save Misty.

"I won't let you die!" Tom yelled.

Three hundred meters; he was almost there. He choked on a wave and sunk once more. No! He wouldn't let Vince be right! Misty would not die! The grey aura around him pulsed again. It was trembling around Tom.

His legs were dead tired, but he continued. For as long as there would be a distance between him and the bank, he would fight. A hundred meters! The water was boiling around them.

"AH!"

Tom was yelling in the water to make himself advance further. He would certainly not let her perish. He readjusted his grip on her and continued swimming with the energy of despair. He had no more strength in his arms. Only pure will was making him continue now. Fifty meters.

His limbs were numb. He sunk at the bottom of the ocean. Still holding Misty's head, he landed in sand swirl caused by the waves. He couldn't swim anymore? So what! With all his strength, he advanced. He was walking at the bottom of the water, against the current, he was putting one feet in front of the other. He climbed a sandy hill. His soles were slipping, but he grasped himself with his free hand. No one would take Misty from him. Not Vince, not his master, not even a god.

The air was abandoning his lungs. He was almost there. The surface was only a few meters away. Ten at the most. Tom swallowed uselessly. Against all odds, he kept going.

Tom arrived at a point where will wasn't sufficient anymore. His free hand reached to the bank. With all the strength he had left, he dragged Misty out of the water, but didn't find the energy to pull himself out.

Water infiltrated his lungs, the cold engulfed him. His eyelids, full of water, salt and sand, were getting heavy then closed. He had saved Misty. It was all that mattered. Nark would go on, and save his parents and Socrate. He could rest now.

Something grabbed his wrist and forcefully pulled him out of the water. Tom was being raised in the air. He coughed the water that had lodged in his lungs, and tried to open his eyes. His vision was still blurred by his tears and the salty water.

When he could finally see clearly, he saw the face of the stranger to whom he talked on the boat. He was at a few centimeter from his nose and easily held him in the air grabbing Tom's wrist over his head.

His yellow eyes had turned the same grey as the energy around Tom.

"A 120,000 manas? You might actually be someone interesting."

Chapter 6:
A Lost Arrow

The man was holding Tom at arm length and threw him away as hard as he could. Tom expected to crash in the sand but that stranger's strength was demonic: instead he violently bounced. As he exhaled, he spat the water in his lungs. He crashed on the dusty floor two then three more times before he slid in the crystals.

He had sand in his eyes but he still managed to see Nark land on the pier with Noemi. He glared at the stranger but the latter didn't pay any attention to him. He had a few more words for Tom:

"Having power and not being able to channel it is the difference between those with potential and losers… like yourself."

Tom was still coughing. So many things were choking him at the same time that he couldn't breathe anymore. The blow had sucked the air out of his lungs and what's left of the salt water, sand and saliva were obstructing his trachea.

"Misty," he articulated.

Tom lifted a protecting hand toward Misty who was still losing blood in the distance. The stranger glanced at the girl he was trying to protect then smiled. Still talking to Tom, he grabbed his sword with his right hand and made his way toward her.

"I wonder. If I kill her, would you become stronger?"

His immense blade was pointed at Misty's innocent throat. It would be so easy to kill her.

Once again, Tom's aura pulsed. Without any strength, Tom still

managed to stand up. His shoulders slumped out of exhaustion, his neck couldn't hold his head straight and his legs were shaking.

"Nobody hurts Misty," he said. "Not now, not ever."

For the first time, the hazblades left their belt by themselves and jumped into Tom's hand. In a split-seconds they turned into swords.

"Tom," whispered Misty.

It was inaudible, even the man next to her didn't hear it. But for Tom, this silent wave acted like an impulse. The man taking Misty hostage blinked once and Tom disappeared.

He reappeared behind him, his dark hazblade on his throat and the white one against his flank.

"Leave her alo…"

In the blink of an eye, Tom's aura shut down and he fell on Misty. He dropped of his hazblades but he had crossed a protective arm under Misty's chin.

The stranger looked at them and smiled in forfeit. Without adding another word, he lifted his sword on his shoulder and left. On his way he crossed path with Nark who gave him a deadly glare before continuing toward Tom and Misty.

The man was leisurely walking toward Secretia. He saw two women running from the opposite direction. They both had slanted eyes, were wearing the same outfit and had huge bosoms. At first glance, he thought they were sisters but their age difference clearly showed that they were mother and daughter. They were followed by a group carrying stretchers.

The man exchanged a quick look with the younger woman then kept on walking. The two women met with Nark and asked what happened. He looked at the one who talked.

"Suling, right?" he asked.

She rapidly nodded and Nark smiled. To find her that easily was a reward in itself but right now they had to take care of Tom and Misty.

“An explosion destroyed the boats. We swam to get here and Tom overworked himself to save Misty. She was attacked from behind and has multiple lacerations…”

Suling didn’t let him finish.

“Team A, take those two back to the hospital and do everything to save their lives. I will not allow any failure! Any other victims?” she asked Nark.

“Noemi on the wharf. She summoned an explosion to protect us. The others are either still in the water or dead.”

She gave him a quick nod to thank him then talked to the people following her.

“Asuka, you are in charge of those four,” she said to her daughter. “Team B and C, find as many survivors as you can.”

The one named Asuka agreed and joined Nark. Two persons took care of Noemi while the others were already carrying Tom and Misty on stretchers toward the village. Suling’s daughter stretched out her hand as a quick introduction then led the way.

Nark took that opportunity to quickly observe her. She was wearing a small mauve jacket covered by a purple kimono, both sleeveless and with a deep neckline. The outfit was belted by a thick yellow ribbon. The kimono was stopping at her knees but Nark could see that underneath she was wearing clear blue pants, almost cyan. Like the stranger before him, he couldn’t help but notice her huge breasts.

To ease the tension, he commented on her outfit.

“I like what you’re wearing.”

Asuka took a quick glance at herself and politely smiled. Despite the pressure on their shoulders, she seemed calm.

“That’s Secretia’s traditional outfit. It’s the only thing I’m wearing.

Intrigued by that, Nark cocked his head to one side. Seeing the weird look on his face, she specified:

“I own multiple copies but unlike other people, I’m always wearing this design.”

Nark didn’t know what to add. Anyway, starting a conversation in their situation wasn’t very suitable. He remained silent and picked up the pace.

They arrived at the hospital a few minutes after and they brought the three unconscious ones into treatment rooms. Nark headed to the waiting room. Three hours passed, then four…

***

Once again, Tom was in the cold room. He had stopped counting how many times this dream came to him.

“I was so close to kill her,” mumbled the shadow to itself.

“I told you I wouldn’t let you,” spat Tom. “W…wait, you were there?”

“You ask a lot of questions. She’ll die anyway, like everyone accompanying you. Nobody will survive and it will be your fault, because you are a… loser.”

“I will not fail and nobody will die, Vince!”

The shadow sighed. The same soft whoosh resonated against the stone walls. Steps got closer to Tom and the sword pierced his heart for the sixth time. He hadn’t stop counting after all.

“We’ll see. Unlike me you cannot change the future…”

***

“HA!"

Tom woke up screaming in pain. Inside, he could feel his heart contract. He had spasms all over his body.

“Clear,” said a voice.

“What?” asked Tom.

He felt two cold plates on his skin, one on his chest, the other one on his flank. Without warning, an electric shock went through him. He coughed then opened his eyes. At first, everything was blurry but his vision eventually

stabilized. He was in a white room.

Tom started to swear. He sat up in his bed and started to tear away all the tubes attached to him. Asuka got closer and asked him to calm down. He looked at her haughtily: she only seemed two years older than him and had huge breast. He raised an eyebrow.

“Who are you?”

“Her name is Asuka. She’s Suling’s daughter.”

Tom looked where the voice came from. Laying against a wall in the room’s corner, Nark, arms crossed, had answered for her.

“I’m tired of always being on the brink of death,” confided Tom. “First, Misty saves me from Vince, then Naffo, Misty saved me again in the Fire ruins and now against this Apocalypse… How is she?”

“Tom, is it?” asked Asuka. “She’s doing great. We treated her wounds and injected her some mana. She’s conscious but asleep. Noemi's in the same state. We were only worried about you.”

“I’m alright. Ever since a few days ago, numbers have started to spin in my head but I don't think it's worth worrying about.”

“What kind of numbers?” asked Nark.

“I don’t know. If I focus on people, it’s like I can feel their presence, see their strength in numbers.”

“It’s a common ability,” said Asuka. “Most of the time it’s hereditary, but it can be mastered. My little brother knows how to use it.”

“You have a brother?” asked Tom.

She nodded.

“His name is Ryu. He’s fourteen, but he's quite misanthrope. If you want to see him, you’ll find him with my dad, Mack.”

“Nark, do they know about Vince?”

“I told Asuka and Suling, but I didn’t know about Mack.”

“Alright, I got this,” said Tom. “I’ll go crazy if I stay in bed anymore.”

He stood up and exited the room. His doctors tried to catch him, but

Asuka said that it wasn't necessary. His state was stable enough despite the two defibrillator charges he just had.

Outside the hospital, Tom took the opportunity to study his surroundings. The village had at most fifty houses as well as a few shops. It was bigger than Tamber and Terfie but still qualified as a village.

The big house was Suling and Mack's, but for now it was empty. Tom tried to find his way. Behind the home, a path was winding up to an open area. Having no idea where to look for Ryu and his dad, Tom started to explore the village. The path took him to a pen. In it, a gigantic 10 meters long golden bird was pecking at the ground. Tom gawked at it.

"Why are you near Sony?" asked a voice.

"Sorry?"

Tom turned around to face the owner of the voice. It was a 14 years old boy with a thick black mane mirroring like steel wool flowing down the middle of his back. On his shoulder was a bag of seeds. Despite is young age, the boy had an impressive shape. His size was of a teenager but every one of his muscles were define.

Tom took a quick look at his clothes. He was wearing a black tunic that went down to his knees and a cape, golden like the bird. But it wasn't what stupefied Tom. He had a weird X-shaped scar above his black piercing eyes. On his torso, a quiver strap crossed a bow string. He was obviously an archer.

He felt a certain animosity coming from the teenager. He was looking at Tom with disdain, like he was inferior, but Tom smiled. Once again, he took his attention to the bird.

"It's a nice bird."

"Blackbird," specified the boy.

"Why are they called that?" wondered Tom.

"They move so fast that to the eyes, they're only black shadows. What do you want from me?"

"Are you Ryu?"

The kid put the bag of seeds down and turned his head toward Tom. The look of disgust in his eyes was even worse.

"No. Now go away."

He lifted a bag of soil on his shoulder and took it behind the pen. Meanwhile, a man was running toward Tom. Like the kid, he had black hair, but Tom recognized him right away for having seen him many times in pictures.

"Hi Tom. You grew quite a lot since I last saw you. Don't mind Ryu, he's wary of strangers."

"So it was him? I saw that, but I'm here to talk about Vince."

"Don't worry, Suling already filled me in. But it's nice of you to come all the way here to warn us."

"Oh… Well I'll go back to the hospital then."

"As soon as you're discharged, you're welcome into our home. Your father did so much for me, it's the least I can do."

Mack nodded and watched Tom leaving. After a few seconds, he looked around him and grabbed a few bags of soil.

Back at the hospital, Tom searched for his two friends. Misty was in a room but Noemi had left hers to explore the village. He got angry at Nark for letting her leave in such a bad state. Annoyed, Nark looked back at him with an eyebrow raised. Tom did the exact same thing an hour earlier.

Upset, Tom silently and slowly entered Misty's room as to not wake her up. He got close to her and sat on her bed. She was almost entirely covered in bandages. Only her arms and head were spared.

At that moment, Tom didn't know if he hated himself or his incompetence.

"It will never happen again," he swore.

Outside, it was almost nighttime. Noemi was walking toward the pen. Her eyes were fixated on the clouds. The sky was sprinkled with white

sometimes grey, cotton balls. They were moving with the wind, making the growing shadows dance.

“Are you lost?” asked he same cold voice.

Noemi moved her attention from the clouds to the owner of the voice. It was the same boy that Tom met an hour earlier.

She nicely smiled and shook her head to indicate it was not the case.

“Then you got nothing to do here.”

He threw his bag against a wall and approached a lantern. Night was upon them and if he wanted to keep on working, he needed light.

Ryu lifted his palm and a fireball appeared. He threw it in the little box and it lit the candle. Noemi, who watched him with interest, asked with the same gentleness:

“You know magic?”

Ryu didn’t answer. After all it was obvious and he didn’t need to. She wasn’t blind so she could draw her own conclusions. He grabbed two bags of seeds and went back to the bird’s pen. Noemi, wanting to help, tried to lift one of them but couldn’t get it off the ground. Ryu came back and shoved her.

“Move, you’re slowing me down.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I just wanted to help.”

He threw her an annoyed look, like she had just insulted him.

“You obviously can’t so get out of my way.”

She apologized again. While Ryu was bending down to lift another bag, she saw a wound on his right arm. Blood was dripping from his elbow to his fingers.

“Are you hurt?” Noemi asked.

“It’s nothing. Just a cut from the pen.”

As Ryu was standing up, she laid her hand on the cut. When she removed it, it stopped bleeding and the wound was closed.

Ryu’s face tensed up. With rage, he threw the bag on the ground and slapped Noemi.

“What’s your problem?” he asked, indignantly. “Did I ask you for anything?”

She didn’t answer right away. Her sweetness was turning into sadness. She lifted her left hand to her cheek. It didn’t hurt but it surprised her.

“No,” she admitted.

Noemi turned around. She was definitely not wanted here. A hand still on her cheek, she started to head back.

“No,” she repeated. “But you shouldn’t turn down a helping hand. People are not always gifted in every domain but I know what I’m good at, and that’s what you’re lacking.”

She walked away slowly. Ryu stared at the ground while he was crouching to grab the bag he threw away. It was way easier to do, the wound being gone like it vanished into thin air. A look of surprise appeared on his face. He looked at where Noemi just disappeared and felt a bit of culpability. He shook it off right away and went back to his urgent work.

Back at the hospital, Noemi got redirected to Suling and Mack’s house. After all, the hospital was for the wounded, it wasn’t an inn. Misty had also been moved into a bedroom there, but Tom didn’t leave her side. Luckily, Noemi and Nark each got their own room for the night. If the hospital wasn’t an inn, this house had everything it needs to be one.

That night, around eleven, a shadow landed on their temporary inn's roof. It was proudly standing on the slope, looking at the night and clouds, trying to listen. In the distance, crickets could be heard while the wind was blowing through the leaves.

A window opened, letting a beam of yellow light outside. Asuka’s head appeared and she looked at the silhouette on the roof. She realized it was the same man she saw that morning.

“Oh it’s you!” she said.

“Don’t talk to strangers like you know them,” replied the man

without looking at her.

She smiled. She crossed her arms on the window sill then rested her chin on top.

“Yes but you shouldn’t invade roofs like that.”

“I’m looking for people.”

“Maybe I can help,” she offered.

“I doubt it.”

“Do you know about tarot?”

“Do you practice it?

“In a way, yes,” she confided. “I use cards infused with magic. I got a lot of different ones. I ask them a question then I draw them so that they give me the answer I need.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m a solitary cat.”

The man bent his knees. Asuka concluded that he had enough chitchat and was about to leave.

“One last question.” she said. “What’s your name?”

Amused, he smiled and closed his eyes.

“A lot of people would like to know that. How would that make a difference if you knew?”

Without giving her a chance to reply, he jumped into the night. Asuka looked at him and smiled. He was funny. She went back inside and closed the window.

Tom jolted awake at dawn. He had fallen asleep while watching over Misty. He would have probably went back to sleep if she was there, but her bed was empty. Only her bandages remained, scattered all over the blankets. Tom scanned the room and saw her outside, sitting on the balcony. He approached the door and slid it to the side. She was talking with someone, but strangely it was her own voice that answered. She was using two different tone: one was calm while the other was full of anger.

“You almost killed us yesterday!”

“How?” asked Misty.

“Not only you stopped time, but you aimed your spell in a way that let this human’s mobility active! Even worse, you invoked the temporal stop while your plasmic reserves was near empty. If they didn’t inject us some at the hospital, we would be dead.”

“Sorry,” apologized Misty.

“Do not use your powers until another seal is freed. I thought you would be able to control yourself, but I was obviously wrong.”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Tom.

His words startled her. She told him he scared her and he apologized with a smile. He sat next to her, but as soon as he did, she got up like she was avoiding him. Misty went back inside and before closing the door, she told Tom:

“Nobody. Don't spy on me.”

His eyes widened out of surprise. That’s not what he intended to do. She closed the door behind her, leaving Tom alone.

“Chronexia, give me my body back!” she yelled.

“Don’t worry. With only one seal, I can only take control for fifteen seconds at best. But I want you to know that I really hate this human.”

Misty closed her eyes and reopened them. They looked different. Nobody could have seen the personality switch, but for her it was a relief. She reopened the door to go back to Tom, but he was already gone.

All day, Tom put his free time to use by replenishing his travel inventory. Now that he thought of it, traveling was a lot harder than he imagined. He had to foresee all possible eventualities. Walking from stores to stores, he didn’t meet Misty again before late afternoon, when he was done with his shopping. An awkward silence fell between them.

“I’m sorry for what I said this morning,” apologized Misty. “I really appreciate you worrying about me.”

“No, you were right, it was none of my business. You’re allowed to

have your own secrets."

About one kilometer away, between the pen and the house, there was a powerful explosion. The blackbird flew away into the acrid smoke.

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Five minutes earlier, Suling and Mack met up on the path leading to the pen.

"You warned them?" asked Mack.

"Of course not, who do you think I am? We don't want to involve them in this story like Tom and Noemi…"

A screeching laugh surrounded them. It started low but stretched into a sadistic and manic complaint. Vince appeared a few meters away, his lips stretched into a wicked smile and an insane look in his eyes. He was flanked by a white angel floating on his left and a gigantic man on the right. He was at least two meters fifty and was incredibly muscular. His fists were the size of a pumpkin.

"They all spew the same crap. If it was five versus three, you may have a chance, but you always want to protect everybody. So be nice and surrender."

Suling took a deck of card out while Mack drew his sword. They obviously had no intention to surrender.

Seeing that they were still not cooperating, Vince let out a sigh. He disappeared and reappeared at Suling and Mack's neck. Once again his voice was serious, reflecting his veteran status.

"What makes you think that you have a shot at winning?"

Mack broke loose by spinning on himself and his wife mimicked him. She threw a card at Vince's foot. The paper scrap stabbed the ground like a steel blade. Mack struck him with his sword.

"Explosion!" commanded Suling.

The half-buried card lit-up and exploded, raising a fire and black smoke screen. Mack's blade touched Vince. The smoke was preventing him to

see the wound he inflicted, but according the angle, the blade was past his collarbone.

Once the smoke dissipated, Vince was still standing. The explosion messed up his hair, but nothing more. He was holding Mack's blade between his index and his middle finger and was looking at him with intense bitterness, almost weariness.

"Been there, done that," said Vince.

In his free hand, the same weapon that Tom had dreamed about appeared. He leaned on one side and hit Suling's stomach with his knee. The force of the impact made her roll on the ground, choking and coughing. He finished his move by slicing Mack's sternum with his blade.

Blood gushed. Holding his chest, Mack staggered then fell down. On the other side, Suling was still coughing in order to catch her breath.

Without looking at them, Vince threw his sword to the ground and lifted his hands. Green bubbles captured both adults and lifted them off the ground. Vince took a step forward and kicked under the hilt of his sword. Freed from the ground, it raised in the air. In a fluid movement, Vince caught it with his right hand. In his left, a shield appeared.

On the house's roof, the same shadow as before landed. He started to draw his sword out but changed his mind. Instead he waited with a smile.

In an exasperatingly slow motion, Vince placed his blade on his back and unfolded his left arm to the outside. He waited like that for two seconds then got what he waited for. Misty's boomerang bounced on his shield and Tom hazblades hit his sword on his back.

"You're late," he said, annoyed. "I already captured them."

Tom pushed so hard on his blades that he started shaking, but Vince, as unpleasant as his position was, didn't utter a sound.

"Let them go," both said at the same time.

Vince took a childish twangy voice to mimic Tom. He easily unfolded his arm and pushed Tom away. He turned around and looked at the two kids who

kept meddling with his plans. He looked at his surroundings and displayed an exaggerated pout.

"I thought that the girl from Terfie would come with you, but I guess she's too young for the trip… Never mind! Here she comes!" he said, suddenly in high spirits.

Noemi was running toward them and tried to pierce the bubbles with her staff, completely in vain. Every hit was absorbed by it then it pushed her back. She fell on her back. She grew even angrier when she saw that Vince was mocking her. She wanted to save Asuka and Ryu's parent to save them from feeling the same sadness as she did, but now his laughs gave her a taste for revenge.

"You asked for it," she said. "Ah!"

Tom and Misty turned their heads toward her. She had lifted her staff like a scepter and she was blinded by her intense concentration.

"Po!"

Her companions exchanged a look of panic. They had just realized how much Noemi yearned for revenge. She didn't care about her safety or the others'. In her burning rage, she only thought about killing him.

"Ca!"

"Noemi, no!" yelled Tom.

"Lyp…"

A hit on her head took her out. Nark had joined her and rendered her unconscious before she summoned her carnage.

"Sorry," he said while catching her.

He gently dropped her on the ground and joined Tom and Misty. He didn't let Vince out of his sight and stared with the same hatred as the other two. Behind Vince, his henchmen were still standing motionless.

"Hey! We know each other, right?" sympathized Vince toward Nark.

Nark gave him a malignant look. That kind of joking tone was only insulting.

Without warning, three rays of yellow light sparkled and headed toward Vince. Once the light dissipated, they could see three arrows stuck in him. The first was in his hip, the second was between his collarbone and his left shoulder and the last one was sticking out of his ribs. A fourth one buried itself in his right foot, forcing him to drop on one knee. He spat blood then looked for his attacker.

Walking forward from the pen, Ryu was holding his bow. With no remorse, he grabbed another arrow from his quiver and shot it in Vince's knee. The head went through the flesh and caused him to groan.

"Free my father!"

The order made Tom shiver, but Vince only laughed. Ryu was still approaching. He shot another arrow that lodged itself in the man's elbow. One by one, his joint were locked.

Vince's henchmen finally moved and went after Ryu. The angel landed behind him, but Ryu didn't pay him any attention.

"Fire card, wind card" said another voice in the same tone as Ryu.

An enormous fire tornado spiraled behind him. It completely swallowed the angel. The storm had to be around a hundred degrees Celsius, but Ryu was ignoring it. His hair, black as night, were dancing in the heat. When the tornado went out, its victim had disappeared. Only a painful moan was still resonating.

"Free them!" repeated Ryu.

"No!" answered Vince.

He was riddled with arrows but was still resisting. With the two fingers he used to block Mack's attack, he made the green prisons disappear.

"You're dead" said Ryu.

A blue aura burst around him. In Tom's head, the numbers started to roll. Thirty thousand? What did it means?

"Zeus!" called Ryu.

A ghostly figure appeared from the blue aura. It was a rather young

muscular man, but with a thick white beard. In his hand, he was holding a two meters long lightning bolt.

He threw it at Vince, but his second henchman intervened. For a few seconds, a white flash illuminated the surrounding area. Like the fire tornado, it charred the giant man. A second bold appeared in Zeus' hand. He aimed at Vince again and threw it.

Being in a difficult position, Vince swore.

Someone threw a big sword between him and the lightning bolt. The weapon absorbed it and buried itself in the ground. Tom looked at it and recognized it immediately: it was the man's they crossed path with on the ship.

Its owner jumped from the main house's roof and landed between them and Vince. He grabbed his sword and rested it on his shoulder. Vince took this opportunity to disappear. Above Ryu, Zeus slowly vanished then disappeared.

Tom approached the stranger and grabbed him by his red kimono's collar.

"Why did you save him? Are you on his side?"

"Two reasons," he slowly answered. "First, if you kill him. You'll never know where he took his prisoners. They would be lost."

Tom let go of his grip. He hated to face it but the man was right.

"The second reason is my own business."

He smiled and turned around. He took a few steps then addressed them again.

"You," he said, pointing at Ryu. "You're good." Then he pointed at Tom. "You. You're just a beginner. You did nothing during the whole fight, even if you had multiple openings. It's pathetic."

He disappeared in one jump. Tom raged. They were slightly better, but they still failed in the end. No. In fact they recruited stronger people, but Tom himself didn't improve. Vince anticipated his every move and countered

them. In a one on one fight, Tom would be dead.

"HA!"

Tom fell on his knees. Nark took a step back. He went to get Noemi and brought her back to Tom. Misty came closer to him but didn't do anything. The places changed, the amount of people was different, but the result was the same: a bitter failure.

"I guess we're in the same boat now," sighed Asuka.

She took a few steps forward and smiled. What was so funny? Nark asked her. As an answer, she drew two cards from her pocket. One of them represented the sphere of life that Tom saw in picture during his classes, the other was a beach and an ocean, but it was upside down.

"Mana and water cards. Mana means that there is still hope and upside down water means new encounters.

"In other words, to save them we must press on?" asked Misty.

Asuka nodded and put her cards back in her pocket. This divination, even if it was more or less believable, gave Tom some energy back. There was still Maxime and Krissy. Another night was coming, dusk was drawing on them.

Tom stood up and followed Asuka to her house. Nark carried Noemi and Misty walked with him. A bit behind, Ryu was following while mumbling something.

"Six… I hate to lose my arrows. And I wasted a god. I wonder were Sony flew away."

Twilight was upon them and Tom headed to Ryu's bedroom. He knocked on the door but nobody answered. He knocked again and Ryu opened. He was still harboring an angry expression.

"What do you want?"

"I got a few questions for you. May I?"

"If I let you, will you leave me alone after that?"

Tom nodded. Ryu sighted and let him in. He slid the door closed

behind Tom and rested his back on it while Tom asked his damned questions.

“What was that thing during the fight?”

“Zeus?” Tom nodded. “It’s a god. My sister is able to capture and invoke the elements and some items. I can call upon gods. Only once, but it’s one of my abilities. Once I used them, they disappear forever.”

“Asuka told me that you had the ability to see people’s power. I can do it too but I don’t understand the way it works.”

“It’s easy. The numbers you feel are a person’s power. If someone has ten thousand manas, they’re stronger than someone who has eight thousand.”

“What’s the maximum?”

“There aren’t any. The more a Fae is powerful, the higher the numbers. But it’s unusual to see someone with more than fifty thousand mana.”

“What’s a Fae?”

“That’s it. You bothered me enough so leave me alone. If I come with you it’s certainly not to befriends you all.”

Outside the room, the floor cracked and a shadow fled. Ryu opened the door and pushed Tom outside. He closed it again and went to bed. Tom went back to his room and did the same but the fear of having the same dream and that afternoon's event kept him wide awake.

In the morning, the six of them took the direction of Edanqua. It was really close from Secretia: they only had a forest to cross and they would reach their destination.

They took a path made for travelers and left the ninja’s village. They walked for a few hours. Ryu wasn’t waiting for them. He often left them behind then waited slightly ahead while stomping his foot. Once more, Noemi asked for a break and it greatly annoyed him.

Tired of waiting, he left without them again. Edanqua was only half a dozen kilometers away anyway.

The wind whistled between the trees. An arrow buried itself in Noemi's back. Being the last in line, she was the one being targeted. She fell on the ground. The noise drew the others' attention and they saw the arrow's head.

"Noemi!" shout Misty.

Rustling leaves betrayed the attacker who started to jump from one branch to the other. Tom saw it and went after it. The person must have been incredibly agile because he was able to lose Tom. When he came back to the group, Ryu reappeared.

"You stopped again," he sighted.

"Noemi was attacked," said Nark.

He threw the arrow that wounded Noemi to Ryu. There were still poison traces on the weapon's head. While everybody was taking care of the girl, Ryu put the arrow in his quiver. A thin smile stretched on his lips.

"I hate to lose my arrows…"

Chapter 7:
The Water City

Tom looked around him. Few hours had passed since the assault on Noemi and only the location had changed. The state of panic was still at its peak. Except for Ryu, everyone was worried.

He was now inside an Edanquan clinic. After the incident, Tom had taken Noemi in his arms and urgently transported her there. The others followed him, but parted ways in the city. Ryu pretexted not wanting to be seen with this group of “scums” and Nark thought good to warn Maxime and Krissy. Despite the fact that Noemi's injury was more important than Vince's mischiefs, the presence of Nark in the clinic was completely useless. Therefore, he chose to keep himself busy otherwise.

Misty and Asuka had followed Tom to the building. A man with a brown curly beard had taken care of the wounded girl. The place looked nothing like the Secretian hospital, but as long as they could heal Noemi, the luxury wasn’t important. The walls were made of tarnished rocks, the steel table was rusty and cockroaches crawled in the corners.

The doctor had turned Noemi and examined her wound with a magnifying glass. His eye seemed to be bothered by the situation.

“You have a problem,” he told them.

“Yes, I can see that,” replied Tom annoyed. “What I want is the solution!”

“She has been poisoned,” explained the doctor. “You need an antidote.”

Nark arrived in the clinic with the two last members of the elite, but no one paid attention to them.

"Does it exist?" Misty asked.

"Yes. There's a curative plant in Onyxvalley, but it's located three days of walk from here, and she will be dead by then. I stabilised her for now. I can keep her until she dies and make sure to allow you as much time as I can to let you think of a solution. I have told you all that I know, please leave."

Tom left slamming the door behind him. He hated this doctor. Why wouldn't he have all the remedies with him? What kind of doctor was he? Unable to heal his injured? He sat on the sidewalk, while waiting for the others. Was it really the moment to think about this? He had to find a solution.

Misty and the others left the clinic and joined Tom. They were now in the main area of Edanqua: an enormous circular cobblestone path which allowed the bystanders to stroll as they wished. A few carriages and horses crossed their iron against the stone. Multiple businesses were built around the cobblestone: the clinic was one of them, the cathedral was another, just like the university academy and all the essential building of a city. After all, Edanqua was reputed to be the second biggest city in Mana.

From roof to roof, the same silhouette with white long hair jumped. The small group caught its attention and, with a bigger leap, it headed toward them with the same amused smile. Even with this distance, he was able to hear their conversation.

"What are we going to do if we can't get the antidote?" asked Tom out of ideas.

"I don't know," whined Misty. "I had promised Flora nothing would happen to her."

"I'm sure we could make it in time, if we didn't need to stay for Vince."

"You carry onward."

The stranger from the boatcrashed on the pavement. When he got

up, the ground below him had cracks as if a meteorite had attacked it. Tom put his hands on his hazblades, but the man smiled. Beside him, Nark had also taken a combat stance.

“You continue what you were doing, and you forget her,” he repeated.

“You got to be kidding me, I hope!” spat Tom.

“What can you do about it?” asked the man. “You're no longer in your small village. Outside, it’s like being caught in a war. This is what’s going to happen if Vince isn’t stopped. What's best? A sacrifice to the eyes of the world or the other way around?”

“I’ll save everyone!” promised Tom.

A grey aura exploded around Tom. The same he had in the ruins of fire and when he saved Misty from the Apocalypse.

“What you want and what you can do are two distinctive concepts,” the stranger told him.

Tom took a step forward, but Nark stopped him. He seemed thoughtful.

“I hate this guy, but he's right.”

“You too? You want to abandon Noemi!” angered Tom.

“No, you're wrong. But he's right! We should continue... Follow my logic. If we go to the Water city, which is a day of walk from Edanqua, we could gain a little more power for Misty. If she used them on Noemi, and rewound the state of her body to before the attack, we could save her.”

“Yeah!” approved Misty. “Chronexia will hate me for doing that, but this is a maneuver I am willing to try.”

Asuka seemed pensive.

“It’s a huge gamble to take, but on the other hand, do we really have a choice?”

“Who's going?” wondered Nark. “Except Tom, Noemi and Misty, none of us have fought challenges before. Misty has to go, but we can’t forget

about Vince."

"Let's bring Maxime and Krissy with us," proposed Tom.

"Useless," replied Nark. "Vince will attack the city if he doesn't get what he wants. We want to limit the damages. What matters is to save the citizens."

"Nark and Asuka, would you mind coming along?" Implored Misty. "Tom, I leave the city in your hands."

"Alright" approved Tom. "Anyway, I have unfinished business with this clown."

With his index he pointed in the direction of the stranger in front of him. He had questions, and this time, was demanding answers.

The smile of the stranger widen with satisfaction. A detail had made its way to his ears, and it was exactly what he was looking for. Misty passed her hand across Tom's aura and put it on his shoulder as a sign of trust.

"We're leaving now, we'll be back tomorrow."

Without waiting for his consent, Misty bolted with the others. She couldn't see herself completing a challenge without her best friends, but the current conditions forced her to. Tom took his hazblades and transformed them. Slowly the two green balls stretched into swords. The stranger didn't even glance at them. Weapons were weapons, no matter how they worked. The stranger brought his hand behind his neck, and took his gigantic sword out.

"Who are you? And who are you working for? Vince?"

"I'm on my own, I'm looking for someone, Tom. Vince knows his location therefore I want to capture him."

He knew his name? Of course, Misty had just pronounced it before leaving. He called him by his first name solely as a taunt.

"If you don't answer, I will execute you," threatened Tom.

"You think you're capable of such a thing? Please, you wouldn't even reach my power. Instead, you should tell me what you know about Vince."

“And you believe I'll comply!” exclaimed Tom. “Out of my way. You made me lose enough time.”

Tom tried to calm down. He needed to avoid useless fighting. His temper often pushed him to commit actions, which he regretted afterward. He wanted to get around the stranger, but he blocked the path with his sword.

“This wasn’t a question. I’m ordering you to tell me what you know.”

From his look Tom knew he would get the information that he was looking for at some point. But it sure wouldn’t be from him. He stopped in front of the weapon and the stranger gave him a smile. This smile had nothing friendly, quite the opposite actually, more like a smile Vince would wear. Tom tried to measure this character specific numbers. His mana was easily playing in the twelve thousands, while his was not above five thousand.

“If I have to beat the information out of you, I will,” said the stranger. “You’re a weakling anyway, so it won’t take too long. You'll never protect anyone.”

This was a challenge. That man could have slapped him with a white glove, and wouldn’t have insulted Tom more than his last sentence.

Tom spun on himself. He tried to stab his opponent, but with a back step he dodged it. Tom continued and gave a sword strike with his other hand. The same back step made him avoid the blade. Whit his big sword, he gave a vertical swing towards Tom.

Tom moved to his right. The attack barely brushed him. Immediately, the man straightened up his blade and tackled Tom with it. He protected himself with his hazblades just in time. Both parallel, they were holding the strength of the enormous sword. How could he handle such a heavy weapon with only one hand, almost with the tip of his fingers?

“I will save everyone! Misty! My parents! Everyone!”

The grey aura around Tom exploded in another wave of energy. Strangely, the blade that was pushing against his hazblades seemed to have

lost some of its strength. Or was it him who had gotten stronger?

Tom made his hazblades slide downward. The sword of his opponent bounced violently. The stranger continued with the momentum given by Tom to turn and struck Tom's back with the flat part of his sword. The hit propelled Tom to the floor, but he got up immediately. He refused to lose again. His aura continued to pulse. Slowly, Tom was approaching the twelve thousand manas.

"Bring it on" said Tom.

The stranger looked at Tom's hand. The hit that he gave made him lose one of his hazblades. The man smiled.

"You are too straight-forward. You lack strategy. You base your strength on your emotions and you don't think. Raw power accumulate with the emotions, but what's the point of having strength if you can't hit the target?"

"Shut up. You have no idea what I can do."

The wave of energy surpassed the power of the stranger and continued to climb. Tom ran toward him. Predicting his strike, he rose his sword and sliced horizontally. Tom jumped up. The man raised his eyes. Tom's black hazblade came spiraling down toward his hand. He must have thrown it earlier.

Tom caught it and came back down on his opponent. To protect himself, the stranger placed the blade in front of his eyes. With his momentum, Tom struck with all of his strength on the big sword. The hit cleared the blades and Tom gave a powerful head-butt on the white haired skull. Head against head, Tom rolled on his back and carved his white blade against his spine.

The man stumbled and fell on his knee. He had been careless. He had underestimated him. He panted a moment and got up as if he had landed from a simple jump. He turned toward Tom and looked at him.

Tom had blood running down between his eyes, but it didn't seemed

to faze him. He had a determined look on his face. He could see it all in his eyes. His face slightly inclined toward the ground emitted pride and tenacity for any challenge. He would save the world!

“I admit it, I have underestimated you,” he confessed. “But i've also been holding back.”

Around the stranger, a red aura exploded. In Tom’s head, the numbers started to roll. When they stopped, Tom couldn’t believe it. Sixty thousand manas? This was absurd. Ryu told him that it was almost impossible to go above fifty.

In front of him, the stranger blinked with extreme speed. No human could move that fast. He grabbed his neck and raised him from the ground. His grip was so strong, the blood between Tom's eyes started running out a little more.

His yellow pupils with slit irises looked at him with the perseverance of a veteran. Like Tom, blood flowed from his hair to his nose. Tom dropped his hazblades and brought his hands to his neck in order to loosen the grasp. The stranger raised him a little higher and tackled him violently to the ground. Tom spat some blood along with all the air in his lungs.

The stranger left him there on the ground and turned around before leaving. He had a hard time to believe that this kid made him get this angry. At least, in this position he wouldn’t bother him anymore. He didn’t had the information he was looking for, but who cares. He took badly to the fact that he got played by him.

“That’s it?” asked Tom.

The man stopped. He turned, Tom was getting up. He had grabbed his hazblades and was standing up while stumbling.

“I thought you’d be stronger than that, at sixty thousand mana.”

“You’re still standing? That's pretty cocky. You should know when to back down.”

“I will pro… I’ll protect everyone!” whispered Tom.

His own number started to raise, sky rocketing this time. The determination was giving him power. He reached the thirty thousand manas, but it was still far from his sixty. The man frowned. This time he grabbed his sword and turned it so that the sharp edge would be in use. He would put him out for good with this next move. Tom raised his hazblades. He had to go and help Misty.

Both started to run. The injury caused by Tom in the back of his opponent was considerably slowing him down. They were aiming at each other's neck and lowered their weapons.

An energy ball fused between them. It pulsed just before they touched each other and exploded, propelling them on opposite side. Tom flew in the air and his back landed violently on the ground. He rolled in the dust and stopped after a few seconds. His opponent flew in the opposite direction, but stood back up before hitting the ground. He put his feet and left hand to the pavement and slid just like he had given himself a swing on an ice ring. A smoke screen float in the air in his track. When the cloud disappeared, Tom saw Vince floating in front of them. His injuries caused by Ryu's arrows had completely vanished in less than twenty-four hours.

Tom painfully got up, the face covered in soot and blood. He looked at what happened to his previous opponent. The man had raised his head toward the source of this perturbation and saw the half-elf.

"Yo, how are you doing my friend?" he asked the man.

"What do you want, Vince?"

"These two," promptly replied Vince.

He pointed at Maxime and Krissy imprisoned in the same anesthetic bubbles. This was ridiculous. Tom had been so absorbed in his combat that he had forgotten the two things he had to protect. He hadn't been able to save anyone. Of the nine persons Tom wanted to rescue, he had failed every assault. He would protect everyone. How could he say those words?

Tom observed his previous opponent. He seemed to hiss between his

teeth. Their gaze crossed, but Tom brought his sight back immediately on Vince.

“Wow Tom, what happened to your team?” slithered Vince, slightly disappointed. “You know, it’s already sufficiently easy to win against you so if you’re adding handicaps, it's really no fun.”

In his head. Tom didn’t even find the strength to demand that he releases them. He knew he wouldn’t unless he freed them himself. Inside him, the defeat made him lose hope little by little.

“Where can we retrieve them?” asked Tom.

He had inclined his head so low that no one could see his face filled with sadness.

“They’ll be at my master’s castle,” replied Vince, enjoying the despair. “He's been awaiting you eagerly. For a really long time…”

“Go!” yelled Tom.

He raised his head at the same time that he threw his hazblades behind him. The blades flew and blew the bubbles up. They continued their way into a stone wall. Simultaneously, the man he faced earlier jumped, his sword raised. He quickly brought it down on Vince’s chest and a blood spatter stained the pavement.

“Where's Layroy?” exhorted the stranger.

“You pathetic traitor,” hissed Vince.

“I’m no one’s tool!”

For the first time, Tom saw Vince get angry. In his hand appeared the fatidic weapon. The golden handled, jagged sword. Around Vince an aura appeared, similar to his, Misty’s, Ryu’s and the stranger’s, but like each other had his own color: khaki. His power climbed until seventy five thousand manas.

It was reasonable for a veteran like him, but… Ryu had told him that it was almost impossible! How could two persons reach it in less than a day? His thirty thousand manas was pitiful when facing such power.

Vince threw his hand toward his two targets. The bubbles recaptured his prisoners, yet this time they had the color of his aura. From their thickness, Tom could tell they would be puncture-proof. With his two fingers, he made an upward motion, sending them away in the sky before they vanished in the distance. Tom had raised his arm in sign of protest, but once again, it was pointless. Vince didn't appreciate their little conspiracy.

The stranger landed after his surprise attack. He raised his eyes towards Vince, but he was already gone. He had teleported himself behind him and had buried his jagged blade deep in the cut that Tom had already made. Vince slashed opened his back and blood tainted his already redden kimono. Such injury was sufficient to make him die in agonizing pain. This cliché was pleasing for Vince. He faced Tom and gave him his a disgusted look, filled with a certain amount of pity in front of his weakness, his last recourse tactic and his lack of courage.

"I would kill you if he'd allow me, but you must go save them. If you don't, those at the castle and your friends will die. Seems like it has already started."

"So you're the one who injured Noemi?" said Tom, losing his temper.

"Nah, but I'm quite satisfied with the result!"

Vince raised a victorious palm which he looked at. As if he was holding a trophy, he waved towards the sky as he walked to the exit of the town. Like a ghost he faded little by little.

Vince had won? No, not yet. He could still rescue them. He only had to get to that castle he mentioned. He had sworn that he would protect everyone. Without exception. He would not abandon at the first hiccup.

Tom headed toward the stranger and crouched next to him to examine his back. Little by little their aura vanished. The wound was wide open and still bleeding. When he lowered his eyes, Tom was startled. At the bottom of his back, a tail had grown.

"Are you alright?" Asked Tom ignoring the tail.

“Don’t worry, it’s only a small cut. We haven’t finished our fight.”

“Let’s postpone it for another time. For now let’s see this phony doctor. I have a deal to offer you. You want information on Vince, I want some on you.”

Tom wrapped the man’s arm over his shoulder and carried him to the clinic. The doctor saw him enter and frowned. On his shelves, he looked for bandages and suture thread. He began to stitch his back. Laying face down on the operation table, the stranger listened to everything Tom knew about Vince: the encounters, each of his words spoken, the spells he invoked and the people he had killed. Once again the only thing he omitted to tell was his dreams.

“Your turn,” said Tom

“My name's Gab. Satisfied?”

“Gab, yes, it's a start. But that still doesn’t tell me what you are: an elf?”

“Please, don't compare me with that race. I’m a half-demon. Half-human, half-demon. A cat demon,” he specified. “This is why I can jump so far, hear from a distance, see in the dark and have an exaggerated strength.”

“I ignored such a race could exist,” admitted Tom. “So you have a human and a demon parents?”

“Not really,” replied Gab.

“This is good, I’m done,” interrupted the doctor.

He demanded them payment and Tom paid for Gab. He may be a mercenary, but he didn’t seem to care much for this material called gold. He had used his last coins for the cruise for which he tried to be a stowaway.

“I’ll owe you that one,” said Gab. “For now tell me about the rest of your gang.”

“Why? Do you intend to tag along?”

“I don't really have a choice? Vince is after your team, especially you. If I want to see him again, I must follow you.”

Tom smiled. To have a mercenary with this strength in their team would be an extraordinary asset to possess. For Vince and the seals. The seals came back into Tom's mind and he explained to Gab the goddess status of Misty.

Slowly, the night fell on the town. Noemi's state was worsening, but her doctor was taking care to stabilize her, as promised.

***

A boat accosted on an island. It was nighttime, but Misty, Nark and Asuka had reached their destination. On the island was only one cave leading inside an enormous mountain.

Misty entered first, followed by the other two. The place was majestic. Illuminated with blue light, the room was radiant. It was entirely built with rock and water was flowing in every directions. Some stairs on the side gave a slight impression of an arena. Few uninhabited houses added elegance to the place. There was no doors, only a roof and empty window cases. On the roofs water surged creating pools in multiples places. The water was coming from the ceiling of the cave and was pouring in cascades.

"We won't get out of here dry," commented Nark.

Nobody replied to him. They seemed completely absorbed by the beauty of the Water city. Misty shook her head. They weren't there to visit an attraction park, even if this very much looked like one. She started to climb down the stairs. At the bottom was an enormous area with a pedestal as the only decoration. Misty supposed that the god of the place would meet them there.

As soon as they put their feet on the platform, a tall wave of water swiped them. Misty coughed a little and waited for her sight to adjust itself. In front of them was standing a monster similar to Pyro. He was the same size, but was entirely composed of water. He had a beard and hair made of sea foam and clothes composed of green and yellow seaweed. His face was stretched like a sideway tidal wave.

“Hi, my name is Misty, or actually Chronexia. I’m visiting the seals to become the goddess of time.”

“Yes of course, Pyro spoke of you. I am Aqua and I manage the Water city.”

“Can we skip the formalities?” politely pressed Misty. “We don’t have much time.”

“That's pretty ironic. But of course. My challenge has much resemblance to a treasure hunt. You must take an item from a Leviathan and bring it to me.”

“What’s a Leviathan?” asked Asuka

“A mythological monster,” explained Nark. “Some kind of amphibian, but it varies from each legends. Some say it’s a fish, others, a crocodile. As a kid, I was told that he looked like a gigantic frog, palmed feet, sharp teeth, measuring more than five meters.”

“Let’s go now if we want to find his hideout,” said Misty

“Oh! This is not about finding it,” laughed Aqua. “He is near the end of the city. The challenge requires you to bring back its gold ball, not to find it. A goddess need to be rational, sneaky and quick.”

“It sounds promising,” replied Asuka

Misty hurried them to the destination. Far away, they could see the nest of the Leviathan, but to get near it, they had to take multiple corridors, climb walls and cross the city. After 15 minutes, they reached the monster’s hideout. It was completely submerged in darkness and only the gold orb was shining. A loud snoring was making the walls and floor tremble.

“We go inside running and we steal it or we try to be silent?” asked Misty.

“It scares me, I don’t want to go in,” admitted Asuka.

“Do as you wish,” replied Nark. “This is your challenge. But as soon as we have it, we should split up and regroup at the end.”

Misty and Asuka approved. With caution, Misty adventured herself

in the Leviathan's hideout. One step at a time, she stretched her arm in advance to grab the ball. The room was pitch-black. Only this small sphere shining by itself was beating in the heart of the nest.

Misty swallowed nervously and thought that the whole universe had heard her. She tip-toed and synchronised each of her steps to the rhythm of the snoring. Only two meters left. Another light step in the water, silently. Misty turned her head toward the other two who were watching, hidden behind the corner of the doorway. She locked her sight on the ball and took another step. The snoring stopped and Misty's heart skipped a beat. Her stomach formed knots. Did she wake him? She couldn't endure such pressure. She wanted to scream, but the fear to be eaten in an instant was preventing her from breathing. Her hands were shaking. In a quick movement she closed her finger on the sphere. Instantly, a growl resounded against the walls.

Misty turned around and ran. This time, a scream accompanied her action. It was a high-pitch scream mixed with sobs of fear. She passed between Asuka and Nark and continued to run while crying her fear like Noemi had fled from the lizard in the Fire ruins.

"Kyaahh!!" yelled Misty.

Why wasn't Tom here to reassure her, to protect her, to save her? Asuka left in the opposite direction with the same fear in her heart as Misty. Nark, more rational, followed the plan they considered on their way up.

He took the path which was parallel to the one Misty and Asuka chose, and climbed down toward the starting platform. It was approximately one kilometer away from them.

Behind them, the frog that Nark described earlier emerged from the cave. It jumped and landed on the roof of the first house. A waterfall poured on its violet skin. Successively, it scanned the three fugitives. Seeing its golden dot in Misty's hand, the Leviathan went after her. Immediately, Misty's screams sharpen even more.

For a moment, Nark wondered if her pitch could increase even further, but Misty confirmed it a second later. The frog had closed in a little more.

“Misty!” called Nark. “The Leviathan wants its treasure. Throw it to me!”

Without hesitation, Misty threw the ball in Nark’s direction. She didn’t aim, she only wanted to get rid of the thing.

The treasure bounced on a rocky wall and slid in a stream. It crashed on the rocky edge in front of Nark. If he threw himself at it, he could catch the ball, but he didn't know the layout of this place. Whatever, if he wanted to impress Misty, now was his time to shine.

Nark ran on the roof of a house and dove. He caught the marble and turned around before he crashed on the ground. His feet fell into a pool. He had been lucky. Quickly, he started to swim towards the edge. Behind him, a splash indicated that the monster had followed him under the water.

Nark shot an energy burst in the water and left the pool in an instant. The frog emerged from it a few seconds later. It continued to jump on the different roofs. Misty and Asuka had taken different paths, but kept the same pace as him. They had cleared half of the course. Misty didn’t really wanted to have the Leviathan pursuing her again, so, to gain a few seconds, Nark had to make a pass to Asuka.

“Asuka!”

“Throw it,” she replied. “No matter where it’ll go, I’ll catch it.”

Trusting her, Nark threw it as far as he could in Asuka’s direction. Behind him the frog growled and changed direction once again. From her pocket, Asuka pulled a card out and threw it in front of her.

“Card of wind!”

The card changed itself in a draft of wind and Asuka controlled it with her index and middle finger. She made it catch the ball and brought it back in her hand. The frog leaped behind her. Without hesitation, Asuka

jumped on an inclined rock pillar on which water was flowing and sat down. She slid along the pillar for 200 meters and landed on a platform. She ran and dived across a waterfall. She spun around before falling on another water slide.

Feet in the water current, she surged quickly until the next platform. Her ninja blood was unveiling with her acrobatic movements. They were almost at the end, but the frog was catching up to her way too quickly.

“Misty!” called Asuka.

“No, no, no! I don’t want to!” panicked Misty losing her temper between two screams.

“Alright, Nark!” she chained.

Asuka threw the sphere at Nark’s hands. He caught the treasure and looked at it. He smiled. Once again, the frog was behind him, but he had a plan. A waterfall was getting closer. He quickly explained it to the two others.

“I will throw you the real treasure, Misty. Make sure to catch it. Asuka, do not touch the other one.”

The other one? What could be used as a copy?

Nark jumped in the waterfall and threw the golden ball to Asuka. Did Nark lied to them to dupe the frog? If that was the case, it just failed, because Leviathan had adjusted its reaction time and it was already behind the conjurer.

As Nark requested she didn’t caught the ball, but gave herself the trouble to control it with her wind. While stopping it in front of her eyes, she understood the stratagem of her older friend. He told her he could control the mana, but she never thought he could use it this way.

With his energy, Nark had created a ball of the same size. Up close, the flaws were aberrant, but with the distance, it barely showed. Asuka sent the ball to float further away and the Leviathan pursued it.

Misty was almost at the end. She was struggling in a pool filled up to her thigh. Nark threw her the real marble, but Misty’s finger closed too

quickly and it fell to the water. Misty looked aghast when Nark and Asuka joined her.

"I dropped it," she whined.

"What?" panicked the two others.

"I'm sorry!" pleaded Misty.

"Let's find it!" hurried Nark.

The Leviathan was already coming back toward them. Their trickery gained them a few seconds, but this time its preys were in front of it and they weren't fleeing anymore. It could kill them easily. It landed in the pool in front of Misty and Asuka. Nark was diving to find the sphere.

The Leviathan raised its front legs. At the tip of each phalanges had grown a 30 centimeters claw. He scratched the two girls. Misty screamed and closed her eyes to appease an imaginary pain.

When she reopened her eyes, she saw Tom in front of her. With his hazblades, he was holding the Leviathan's left leg. To the right, the stranger they met on the ship was imitating Tom, protecting Asuka. Nark came out of the water with the sphere. He quickly looked at the situation. Tom and Gab gave a quick glimpse to Nark but brought their attention back to their opponent.

"You could have killed it, instead of running away like girls," said Gab.

"They are girls," replied Nark, irritated.

"No I'm talking about you, Princess."

Nark frowned. Since the beginning, he felt deep bitterness toward this person.

With a strike of his black sword, Tom sliced the leg that attacked him. Gab pushed his and sliced the monster sideways in a heavy strike. The beast fell dead in the pool and the water turned red. He made his sword bounce against his shoulder as if his action was nothing.

"That's it?" asked Gab.

He turned toward Tom and surprised him hugging Misty. She hid herself in his arms just before Gab killed the beast. Tom had covered her head with his arm so she wouldn't hear the noise. While falling, the monster created a splash which soaked Tom entirely.

Misty kept crying. She couldn't avoid it. Since the beginning, people wouldn't stop dying, Noemi was on the list and herself had barely escaped it. She wanted to show that she was strong, but she couldn't pretend anymore.

"It's over now," said Tom with his protective tone. "I'm here…"

Misty realized finally. He was there. He came to reassure her, to protect her… to save her. She could always count on him. She wanted to thank him, but no sound came out of her throat. Her emotions were mixed and her logic had completely vanished. She simply cracked under pressure.

"Thank you," she whispered after a moment.

Tom dragged her with him toward Aqua. Nark gave back the golden sphere to Misty who gave it to the god without leaving her savior.

"Indeed, like Pyro said, you are someone interesting," noted Aqua. "As agreed, you have succeeded my seal."

Like at the Fire ruins, the time stopped around Misty and the god. Out of her heart, the same beam made the ghost of Chronexia appear. Her image thickened slightly. The mist of her body changed itself in an opaque smog. She seemed angry.

"I know what you're planning to do with that half-elf. Don't even think about it, you're not ready yet!"

"I'm not asking for your opinion. You can't do anything to stop me."

Chronexia hesitated a moment and sighed.

"You're right. Just try to not kill us, alright? Know your limits. That's all I have to tell you… and get rid of him, I don't like him. I told you."

Chronexia pointed at Tom with her finger, but disappeared the instant after. Slowly, the time started again. Misty thanked Aqua and climbed the stairs with Tom and the others.

"What happened in Edanqua?" asked Nark.

"Vince won," admitted Tom. "But I intend to find him. Gab will help us."

"Gab?" inquired Nark.

Behind him, the half-demon had started to lick the top of his paw. Blood had splashed on his hand. He raised his eyes toward Nark who was looking at him, half disgusted and half insulted.

Gab raised an eyebrow and maintained his gaze for a moment. Nark ignored him and returned toward Tom who started to narrate the scene. Outside the Water city, they built their camping ground. Misty wasn't in a state to travel back tonight and a night sleep would be much welcomed.

Misty was lost in her thoughts while they were installing their tent. She hardly spent a day without Tom and she had cracked under pressure. This revelation made her understand how much she needed him. She was in love with him so much, to a point Tom couldn't understand.

"You want to take a walk?" asked her Tom.

Misty startled without real conviction. She faced him. All the installations were ready and they could go to bed whenever they wanted, but the adrenaline was still rushing through their bodies. She nodded and they left Nark, Asuka and Gab together.

They went around a part of the mountain and walked around a rocky structure. Nine boulders were circling a pedestal with a blue crystal in the middle. Tom closed in to the jewel and stared at it passively.

"When did you get here?" asked Misty.

"When you came out of the cave with the orb."

"Oh!" did Misty ashamed.

Undeniably, he had seen her run around and scream atop of her lungs. Tom moved his gaze upon the jewel and tenderly smiled at her. The scene had charmed him. This was proving that despite becoming a goddess, she would remain the same. Misty would always be Misty.

“Gab ordered me to trust you when we arrived. He said that you would make it without us needing to intervene and he was right.”

“Not entirely,” she whispered.

Tom smiled and returned to her. Since the crystal hadn’t interested her in the slightest, Misty stayed between two boulders. When he arrived at her level, he raised her chin lightly with his index and his thumb. He kindly forced her emerald eyes to look at him. When she finally did, he pressed his forehead against hers and smiled. Misty became red.

“You made it,” confirmed Tom. “You made it till the end. This monster continued to attack despite it. This is why I interfered. I told you that if you couldn’t kill someone, I would take care of it. For every challenge you will have to overcome, I will be there. Nothing will ever happen to you!”

Chapter 8:
The Coliseum

Tom hesitated before he carried on. Was it really necessary to pursue his love interest like that? Even if Vince was still causing casualties and Noemi was in a coma? And what would happen if she rejected him? He would be so hurt that he wouldn't be able to continue. He could wait until the end. No. He had to wait until the end.

Misty's emerald eyes plunged intensely into his brown eyes, but Tom looked away. He softly let go of her chin, gave her a last sad smile and went back to the camp first. He couldn't afford the luxury of love while everybody had been captured and Noemi was dying.

Misty sighed. If he didn't want to talk, trying to force him would be useless. She sighed again and went back inside right behind him. How could she worry about her feelings while all those lives were in the balance? It was selfish.

Back at the camp, she found Nark already in bed, and Gab and Asuka were talking. Without looking at them she kept on going.

"It's a nasty wound you have on your back. You shouldn't fuss about like that," said Asuka.

She was obviously referring to her rescue in the Water city.

"Then I won't save you next time," replied Gab, shrugging.

"Hi hi," she giggled. "I think you won't be able to help yourself."

Gab raised an eyebrow, like she had just challenged him. As an answer, she drew a card from her pocket and showed it to him. It was a drawing of a purple electric discharge. On top of the card, "Electricity card" was written. She was holding it upside down.

“Right side up, electricity means life, power and ultimate will. Upside down, it means repetition.”

“You think? I’m pretty sure they’re wrong,” he answered. “Moreover, I don’t know a thing about tarot. You very well could make the cards lie or you could give them whichever signification you like.”

“That would be pointless,” admitted Asuka. “You still don’t want me to draw you?”

She grabbed her pack and started to mix it. She picked up both end and started to shuffle them with dexterity. There seemed to be about 30 cards. She stopped and waited for Gab to give her an answer. There was no use in continuing if he didn’t want to participate. He only gave her a shrug. Asuka fanned the cards in her hand and asked him to pick three.

He took the eighth, twentieth and twenty-second cards. He gave them back to her and she looked at them with perplexity.

“The attack card shows someone bold who never gives up and will always get what they want, thanks to perseverance. The inverted defense card means that you are a loner, you don’t open to others but that someday you’ll be led by your emotions when someone you care about dies. The card of light is a bit troubling. It shows that you hide a great secret from your current friends, but it’s not a good draw.”

“That’s nonsense.”

He jumped up and leaped in the nearest tree. Like on the ship mast, he sat on a branch and rested his back on the trunk. The attack card may have been right but the defense one was completely wrong. Him, led by his emotions? He sneered on the inside. That would never happen. Although he really was hiding a secret from Tom…

“Are you going to bed?” asked Asuka.

“I never sleep.”

“Oh!” she said. “Good night anyway.”

She entered her tent and went to sleep. Gab looked at the stars. He

needed to let his back recover.

***

The feeling of failure filled Tom's body and resonated in all of his limbs. It was so sickening, he felt nauseous. He tried to ignore it. He was used to this nightmare and this time he was ready to see it through.

He looked up in the dark room. His pupils started to get used to the low light. A hooded figure was standing in front of him and was stretching its back, like it was tired.

"Vince!" raged Tom.

The shadow sighed. It had more than enough of this ridiculous comparison.

"Stop calling me that. Vince is only one of my generals."

"So you're his master?"

"Yes that's what they call me."

Tom tried to read his power but he didn't have the strength to focus anymore. He wanted information and the only thing he learned was that he wasn't even the man he thought he was. He needed to buy time in order to recover.

"Do you know where we are right now? This dream is a premonition of things to come."

"It's nothing but a simple nightmare."

"That already happened seven times? No. Because off you, everybody will die and then it will be your turn… Just like that."

A sword pierced through his chest. Tom felt the spikes tear through his flesh while he was falling on the side. Inside, Tom heard the teeth grind against his ribs. With difficulty, he turned his head. A golden hilt, a serrated blade. Where had he seen this weapon? He felt a terrible taste in his mouth: blood. It started to drain at the corner of his lips and formed a growing puddle.

"Misty…"

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"Tom!"

He suddenly woke up in his tent. Misty and Nark were by his side. The dream was fading away but the taste of blood was still filling his mouth. He coughed and the red liquid stained his blanket.

"Are you alright?" worried Nark.

Still coughing, Tom sat up in order to clear his trachea. Nark gave him a glass of water that he drank immediately.

"Yes, I must have bitten my tongue while sleeping," he lied.

For a split second, Nark and Misty hesitated. Nark was about to exit the tent. He moved the fabric used as a door; outside, the sun was shining.

"I know that I am still like a stranger, but I'd like you to see me as someone you can confide into," he said.

"Thanks, my friend," said Tom.

Nark closed his eyes. He was obviously insulted.

"If only you meant it… Don't take too long, we're leaving in 15 minutes. We still have Noemi to save, remember?"

Tom approved while Nark disappeared. He turned his attention to Misty who was staring at him intensely.

"What are you hiding from me?" she asked.

"Nothing important. Something I have to take care of myself. You got your own secrets with Chronexia, I also got mine."

"You know what happened with her in Secretia?"

"Everybody thinks I'm stupid, but I'm not."

Like Nark a few seconds ago, Misty headed outside.

"I never thought you were stupid," she said.

She left him alone and went to see Nark. She never had the chance to thank him and Asuka after her panic attack during the water trial the day before. She did it hastily.

"Don't worry about it," said Asuka. "After all you tried to save my

parents."

"If Tom's awake, let's go," said Gab from his tree.

In one jump, he came down when Tom arrived. They made their way back in a deafening silence. When they could run, they rushed in a straight line to save some time. Around three in the afternoon, they caught their first glimpse of Edanqua. They reached the town 20 minutes later and 10 additional minutes after, they were back at the clinic.

Misty entered first, followed by all the others. The doctor brought Noemi to her and stepped back to give her some space. He didn't know what she was about to do, but he couldn't do anything else anyway. So might as well let her do her thing.

"You know how to do it?" asked Tom.

"More or less," she confessed.

"Everybody out or we are breaking in!" yelled a voice from the outside.

Nark looked out the window: an army was at the clinic doorstep. They were forming a half circle on the public square. They had pushed away every civilians.

"What should we do?" asked Asuka.

"Stay inside and help Misty if she needs it," instructed Tom. "I'll go see what they want."

"I'll come along," said Gab with a twisted smile.

"Me too," seconded Nark.

Tom didn't wait for them. He opened the door and stepped outside under the bright sunlight. For a second, the way it reflected on all those suits of armor blinded him. When his eyes got adjusted to the light, he estimated that there was about a hundred of them.

"What do you want?"sneered Tom.

The question was callous and his tone pretentious. Gab joined him on his right and Nark on his left. A man in his thirties stepped forward. His

thinning hair were greased down on his scalp with sebum. He was wearing a red and white outfit, so baggy that it seemed that he was wearing a useless layer of clothe. His legs were covered by white tights tucked into some black pointy shoes. On his hip was a thing that Tom only saw once before in his life. Last year, a student in his class made a presentation on it. It was a Toria VX: a Manian firearm. It allowed magic users like Vince and Ryu to easily concentrate their elemental energy in a small chamber that they could activate by pressing the trigger.

“The circus's in town?” asked Gab.

The man in front of him smiled and ignored the taunt. He turned his attention back to Tom, like he was the leader.

“You three and the two girls inside are under arrest.”

“What are the charges against us?” asked Nark.

“Captain Norr,” answered the man. “Second captain of the royal division. We are the government and you are under arrest for ransacking the following towns: Tamber, Terfie, Secretia, Amiro and this city, Edanqua. Some civilians accused you of disturbing the public order, destroying the cities and killing innocents. Are you denying those allegations?”

“Yeeep,” said Gab with an overly slow head nod.

“No,” intervened Tom. “That’s true.”

“In that case, please follow us to Arenight, willingly or by force.”

Asuka reopened the clinic’s door. She was disheveled and hairs were sticking to her sweaty forehead.

“That’s not good. Misty failed. I tried to fill her mana while it was draining but my card couldn’t endure the pressure. It ripped and Misty's unconscious. We can’t save Noemi.”

So it was impossible to save her? They did all they could but it wasn’t enough. Gab had told him so. Willingness and ability are two very different things. The master’s prophecy would turn out to be true. Noemi was dying because of his own imprudence. No, he wouldn’t let it happen!

Around Tom, the grey aura burst in an energy wave. It exploded like a fire. It was shaking and pumping with every pulsation. He wouldn't let anybody separate him from Noemi and Misty. Nobody!

He touched his hazblades. They jumped in his hand and transformed. His left eyelid was twitching with rage. He was fulminating. The government was doing nothing to stop Vince. Instead, they were attacking them? If they obeyed them, everybody would die.

"Go away," whispered Tom. "Go AWAY!"

He rushed towards Norr. His aura stretched to his hazblades. He swung his sword once but a soldier moved between him and the captain. As soon as the hazblade touched his armor, the metal opened. It grazed the man's skin and the strength of the blow sent him flying to the side.

"Out of my way!"

Another soldier appeared in front of him but Tom kicked him away. With his momentum, he jumped above him and struck his white sword through the man's helmet. He was quickly surrounded. These trained soldier wouldn't let themselves be slaughtered one after the other.

Gab went the opposite way. Like Tom, he was surrounded by his aura. He was swinging his sword and was killing as many soldiers as Tom.

Unlike them, Nark was seized right away. Two men were holding his arms and forced him down on his knees. Another soldier armed with an ax was about to behead him. About 20 men were gathered around them. Nark smiled.

"You're dead!" said his executioner.

In a split second, Nark shimmered and a huge energy dome exploded around him. Everything in its wake was disintegrated. It looked kind of like a small version of Noemi's Apocalypse. The dome grew bigger and enveloped the 20 soldiers. When it disappeared, Nark was alone in the center, a knee and a fist on the ground. He was trying to catch his breath but another soldier gave him a violent blow under the jaw that knocked him on

his back. As devastating as Nark's attack was, there was still three quarter of the army left. They couldn't kill them all.

An explosion threw five soldiers in the air. Fire started to burn the stony ground and after a few seconds, Ryu emerged from it. In his right hand, he was holding a fireball and in his left a tiny terracotta pot with a plant inside.

Some soldiers tried to attack him, but as soon as they got near him, the fireball turned into a powerful flame whip. He made his way through the army and between Tom and Gab without noticing them. He continued toward the clinic and entered.

Asuka saw her brother approach. He made the fireball disappear as soon as he got inside. Just like for Tom and Gab, Ryu didn't pay any attention to his sister or Misty at his feet. He approached the doctor and gave him the plant.

"Is this the antidote you need?" he asked, annoyed.

"Yes," confirmed the man after studying the plant.

"Where… where did you find it?" questioned Asuka.

Ryu looked at his sister like she just asked which color was the sky. He sarcastically raised an eyebrow in an insulting way.

"I called my blackbird."

The doctor got the antidote ready and injected it in Noemi's jugular with a syringe. It was pretty extreme, but they needed the antidote to take effect as soon as possible. Ryu threw a pouch filled with gold to the doctor and took Noemi on his back. If he kept her moving, the shot would start to act faster.

Asuka shook her head and grabbed Misty as best as she could. She wasn't as strong as Tom or Gab so she wrapped one of Misty's arm around her shoulders and lifted her with all her might. This shabby place could collapse any second from now. They needed to slip away.

"Get the teleport ready!" ordered Norr. "We're going back to

Arenight. We'll incriminate them there…"

Once outside, Asuka quickly assessed the situation. Tom had been pushed back and Norr was pointing his Toria at him. A soldier had placed a device at the center of the main area and under their feet a huge luminous cyan glyph appeared on the pavement. It probably was the teleport that would bring them to Arenight.

"Card of Defense!"

Her card started to float in front of her and an enormous shield created a translucent dome around the pavement. Asuka lifted her index and middle finger in front of her.

"Canceled!"

The luminous glyph started to flicker under their feet. Discharges came out of it and bounced on the ground.

"What's happening?" worried Norr.

"Captain, this… this shield is creating an interference," answered one of his soldiers.

Around them, buildings started to flash at the same pace as the circle. After a few seconds, the pavement disappeared and their surroundings turned into a plain. Ten seconds later, they were in Terfie's desert. One after the other, the scenery appeared and disappeared.

"This woman is creating a distortion! Stop her before it starts affecting us!"

A second plain appeared around them. Behind Asuka, the grass was going downhill on a steep 45 degrees slope.

A soldier tackled Asuka. Misty's body tipped backward but Nark caught her before she fell down the slope. He laid her on the ground while another soldier slashed his sword at Asuka. Nark pushed her away from the blow. The soldier almost hit her but his sword ended his course in Nark's thigh. The blow pushed him outside the shield. His ankle twisted and broke. Slowly he started to tumble down the slope. When he stopped, Nark looked

at the group while his blood was slowly draining.

"Get back in the shield," yelled Asuka.

Nark pressed his hand on the wound. At the top of the hill, the circle disappeared in a flash, leaving him in an empty and unknown plain. He was a dead man.

"Nark!" called Tom.

Nobody answered. On his right, Ryu didn't move a muscle. He was holding Noemi on his back and was waiting for this madness to stop. Gab got tired of it fast enough. He aimed at the transport mechanism located at the center and struck his big sword directly into it.

A snowy scenery appeared next. At the center of the dome, the teleport started to explode, causing Gab's sword to split in two. The tip of the weapon flew away in the storm. It landed near a pedestal where a grey dot was shining.

Underneath them, the luminous glyph stopped flickering. The scenery changed again and they arrived in a courtyard surrounded by walls. This is where they stopped.

"Captain Norr, we've arrived," reported a soldier.

This time there was nothing they could do. Tom was held at gunpoint, Misty was unconscious, Ryu wasn't resisting and Gab was unarmed which seemed to shock, even disturb him.

"My… my sword. It's… destroyed," he stammered.

"It's just a sword," said Ryu.

"No!" raged Gab. "Without it, I'm… different."

"We'll find it," said Tom.

"Forget about the sword!" protested Asuka. "Nark is about to die."

"Follow me!" ordered Norr.

It's true, Nark was wounded in the middle of nowhere, but what could they do? This thought made Tom feel nauseous. This very morning, he called him friend, and now he was giving up on him that easily. Without any

other option, Tom grabbed Misty and followed the general. If they died, they wouldn't be able to help Nark anyway.

Ryu mimicked him with Noemi and Asuka followed with the same sadness as Gab who chose to stay still for a few second. The loss of his sword hurt him more than if someone from the group had died. A guard shoved him to make him move. With no emotion, he followed Tom.

The captain led them to a flight of stairs at the back of the courtyard that brought them directly to the king. The man was small and a bit chubby. Unlike his captain, he had clean brown hair. He was wearing clothes matching his red, gold and white crown.

"Your Majesty, I bring you the ones who caused all those troubles in the south and south-east."

"Ah yes, I heard about that recently," admitted the king.

A few seconds flew by while he was studying them one by one. He stroked his beard like he was thinking. All of a sudden a smile illuminated his face.

"I have an offer. Since you like to fight, I suggest you take part in the Coliseum."

"What is that?" anticipated Tom.

"A tournament where people face each other," explained Asuka.

"The winner will be cleared from all charges and will be able to save another one of you. The others will be thrown in jail until their public execution. Besides, the winner will also be rewarded with the usual price: some gold and a slave."

"A slave?" repeated Tom.

"She's in excellent condition. She was collected at the sphere of life. Do you agree?"

"Do we have a choice?" asked Tom sarcastically.

"You can chose to be executed right now."

"Tsk," sighed Ryu.

Without further ado, he turned around and headed toward the exit. He was called back right away. Ryu stopped and faced the king.

"Do you even have one charge against me?"

The king looked at his captain who tried to remember a crime Ryu could have committed. Secretia was only damaged a little and nobody saw Ryu there. Then he left the group when they arrived at Edanqua so he wasn't seen with them.

"That's what I thought," he said.

He headed toward the exit again.

"What a selfish jerk," whispered Tom to himself.

He had hated him since the first time they met. Each of his actions made him angrier.

"W…wait!" ordered Norr. "You… you attacked some of our soldiers."

"Article 303.c," quoted Ryu without stopping. "A civilian is allowed to use self-defense if he's attacked without any reason."

Norr grunted. Indeed, his soldiers had launched an assault against that kid who ventured within the army. He didn't do anything, he was only carrying a plant.

"The four of you are still charged with those crimes, so you'll enter the Coliseum."

"Misty won't," said Tom. "If I win, I'll save her."

"You won't," said Gab. "It's a tournament and you'll eventually face me."

"Yes but you don't have a sword anymore."

"The rules are simple," interrupted the king. "You win when your opponent surrenders or dies. But in your case, if you lose, you'll die either way. You'll be held prisoner until the tournament day."

Some guards surrounded them and took them to the so called prison in the castle. It was built with clean white stones. The prison was made of two cells, one was on an upper floor and the other was right below. In Tom's

opinion, it was hardly a prison. It simply was a luxurious room that they weren't allowed to leave. There were four beds, benches, a table and even some entertainment. A door leading to the Coliseum was in the back wall and the barred windows would offer them a good view of the upcoming fights.

Tom laid Misty on one of the beds and sat next to her, waiting for her to regain consciousness. Asuka shuffled her 29 cards left then she drew them. Gab simply waited.

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A day had passed in their prison. Tom was still watching over Misty. The guards saw him whisper in her hear, probably encouraging words to help her out of her temporary coma. After a while he turned Asuka and Gab.

"What am I going to do with a slave?" he thought out loud. "No offense, but Misty won't die because of me. If I have to sacrifice you to save her, then so be it. You're so slow. I could go rescue that slave while I'm fighting you off."

Gab let slip a short sardonic laugh. Leaning against the wall, he had his arms crossed and was looking at Tom with his cat-like eyes. He had become pretentious. Now he was acting like he had already won.

"You think? You ought to make sure you win against your opponent so that we can finish our fight started at Edanqua. I will smash holes everywhere."

"You never saw my card of speed," added Asuka in regard of Tom's previous taunt. "I could outrun anyone, anyday."

"Oh really?" said Tom, leaning toward her. "And do you think it will be enough to move away from this?"

Tom widened his arm to design himself haughtily. The Coliseum had turned them hostile toward each other. The guards opened their cell and separated them.

"Keep that for the stadium," ordered one of them while pushing Tom on the bed. "Paid to babysit children, you got to be kidding me," he added to

himself. “I’d rather train with corporal Hero, now that he’s back in action.”

Something made their cell shake but everybody ignored it. The guards left and locked the door behind them. Another day went by, this time in a deafening silence. Then Misty finally awoke and proceeded to assault them with endless questions.

“Where are we? How is Noemi doing? Where is Nark?”

Tom asked her to calm down. He then recounted in details the events that occurred since she lost consciousness until she woke up.

“Serves him right. I didn’t like him anyway,” said Gab, barging in on their conversation.

Tom and Misty stopped. They concluded that he was talking about Nark, but why did he hate him so much?

“No reason. I don’t like his face and his behavior annoys me. You hate Ryu for the same reasons,” he said to Tom. “You can’t judge me for that. Good riddance.”

“Is he dead?” asked Misty.

“I hope not but I have no idea,” confessed Tom. “He stumbled upon us on the Domino path so if somehow he survives, I think he’ll be able to find us. But for the Coliseum, I thought it was a good idea to not register you since you cannot kill.”

Misty nodded. She had thought about their uncomfortable situation. With no solution of her own, she couldn’t argue. Anyway, she was more preoccupied about Noemi and Ryu’s intentions. To her profound relief, he saved her but why? According to Asuka he never showed interest in anybody else, so why save her?

“The first fight is about to begin,” announced a guard. “You will fight against Norr. There is a total of six participants. You will fight each other only if you win the first round. The winner of the third fight will face the winner of the fourth. The fifth fight will determine the champion.”

“I go first?” asked Tom, impatient.

The guard nodded and opened the door at the back of their cell. He let Tom enter the Coliseum.

"You'll fight the captain. Try to survive long enough to please the crowd."

"I'm counting on it."

"Hey Tom," called out Gab. "You're not allowed to lose. We still have that fight to finish."

Tom smiled and pressed on. The guard closed the door behind him and left the group alone in their prison. Misty and Asuka approached the window to watch the fight. Under the sun, Tom trampled on the scorching sand. The place kind of looked like an artificial desert. No place to hide. A 200 meters circular area was surrounded by high rock walls. On top of it were stands for the spectators. The whole city was there to watch the monthly event. Arenight was Mana's biggest city so Tom wasn't surprised to see more than a hundred thousand people there.

At the north and south ends were two immense red and black doors. Tom gave a general look at the Coliseum then focused on the king's official lodge. His Majesty was sitting on his throne with his bodyguards and two others. On his right was a man holding a cushion with a gold purse resting on it. On his left was a cuffed 18 years old woman with blond hair. She probably was the slave mentioned as a prize. The king probably took her out of her prison to motivate the contestants, but nobody paid attention to her for more than a second.

"May the tournament begin!" announced the king. "The winner will get this woman and twenty thousand gold pieces."

The northern door opened to let Norr in. He moved forward in the arena until he reached the center where he stopped. He saluted the crowd with a deep bow. He was being acclaimed while Tom joined him.

"Consider yourselves lucky," said Norr. "You usually have to pay to enter the Coliseum."

Tom didn't answer. His hands were close to his hazblades. He couldn't lose. Misty's life depended on him. In his head, different memories were rushing back to him.

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He saw himself running in Terfie's desert. Behind him, the sand worms' furrows were slowly getting closer.

"I always told you you could count on me, no matter what. Didn't I?"

A second memory followed. He was still in the desert, but it was nighttime and he was sitting on a dune. He was talking to Misty, hidden on the other side.

"You always put your trust in me," he said. "It's more than everything I ever hoped for. As long as you trust me, I swear that nothing will happen to you. It's not a vow, it's a fact. If you can't kill someone who has to die, I'll do it for you. I won't let anything happen to you or Noemi."

The surroundings changed again. He was now facing a gigantic frog. With one strike of his sword, he cut its leg and turned to face Misty. A slicing sound could be heard but he took Misty in his arms. He completely cradled her and burrowed his face in her neck. With his fingers, he gently pressed on her ear's tragus so that she could not hear a thing. Once Gab's attack faded, he removed his fingers. Misty was shaking, she didn't want to let him go.

"It's over now, I'm here…"

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The aura surrounding Tom exploded with an unrestrained power. Like in Secretia, his hazblades jumped in his hands and transformed before he touched them. He caught them and pointed the white one at the captain. Tom could feel his own power: forty thousand manas.

That wasn't enough. Misty couldn't kill, she couldn't fight so he'd do it for her!

"You are about to die," said Norr.

"You should back down before I get angrier."

"You're just a kid. I've been training five years for this captain rank."

"And I 10 for Misty," raised Tom.

Norr frowned and drew his Toria. He aimed it at Tom and fired his first round. A fireball flew out of the barrel. Tom covered his face with his black sword. The flames bounced on it and disappeared. Tom rushed toward the captain and struck his hazblade. Norr dodged him easily. With his shoulder, he pushed Tom away.

He fired a second round: it was grey blue, probably a shot of ice and water. The discharge hit his Ixcross and a thin layer of frost formed around Tom's joint.

"If you're hit, your arm will fall off," Norr warned him.

The captain tried to hit his shoulder but Tom distanced himself.

"You can't approach me anymore. You lost."

Tom's arm was frozen at a right angle from the ground. Norr kept on shooting at him with his elements. He dodged multiple discharges, but got struck by lightning. The electricity ran through his body for a few seconds.

Tom had to keep Norr at a distance until he fired the shot he needed. Another fireball exited the barrel. Tom placed his shoulder in its trajectory. Norr realized his mistake right away.

The ice on Tom's shoulder slowly melted. The frostbite's pain was still present but at least he could move his left arm. He tightened his grip on his hazblades. His tactic was making the captain nervous. Norr burst out laughing. His nose in the air, his laugh intensified. It twisted into a shrill scream.

With his Toria, he shot a long frozen discharge in the shape of a half circle in front of him. The laser turned into crystallized pieces of ice that were smoking with frost. Norr had built himself a tiny ice fortress.

"You can't do anything from that distance!"

Tom ignored him. With his forty thousand manas, he moved toward him. His face slightly inclined toward the ground and he was closing the gap

between them as if Norr didn't do anything. This behavior made the captain step back instinctively.

Tom threw his white hazblade in the air. It span and turned back in its original ball shape. He was sheathing his weapons? Was he giving up?

"It's over," said Tom.

The hazblade, in its ball shape, started to come back down. The black one's hilt stretched enough to become two-handed. Tom gripped it firmly and with all his might, he hit the light green ball when it arrived at his eyes level.

The white hazblade quickly flew toward Norr. It turned into a sword and impaled him in the torso. Transferred into the blow, the Ixcross power sent him flying backward and he landed on the sand further away.

There was a deafening silence while Tom headed toward the captain to retrieve his weapon. Him removing the blade from Norr's body caused a huge uproar in the crowd. Tom didn't know if he was booed or acclaimed, but he didn't care either way. Misty was safe for now.

When he came back to his cell, nobody said a word. After a few minutes, they came to get Gab for the second fight. If Gab won, Asuka would be next and after that they would resume the fight they started at Edanqua? Tom didn't know what to think of it. Now that they were part of the same group, could he turn against him?

"How will you fight without a sword?" worried Asuka.

"My claws will be enough," answered Gab.

Tom studied the half-demon's fingers. On every one of them, instead of the usual human nails, he had a five centimeters claw. Tom never paid attention to it before, but now he wished that he had.

The door opened and the sun hit his cat eyes. He recoiled while hissing. His temples were beating from the pain of the temporary blindness. He blinked a few time to recover his sight then headed onto the sunny arena. A silhouette was standing in front of him. Gab used his hand as a visor to

examine him.

It was a man in his late twenties. Like Gab, he had long white hair and was wearing dark blue pants. His vest was slightly lighter. Blue, white and red tribal marks were drawn on his face. He carried a longsword on his hip and a weird weapon on his back. It was a blade shaped like a crescent moon attached in its center by a long chain.

“Who are you?” asked Gab. “You’re way too powerful to bother with that kind of prizes.”

“I’m a demon hunter. I exterminate abominations like you with my sinclair.”

The man pointed at the crescent moon on his back, but didn’t use it. Instead he unsheathed his sword and immediately charged at Gab who dodged the first strike with a jump and the second strike with a bigger one. The man’s charges were unrelenting. After a few seconds, Gab found himself pressed against the circular wall. He put his feet on the stone and he launched himself toward the hunter. The man shielded himself by raising his sword in front of his eyes. Gab powerfully clawed at it then jumped away from his opponent. He landed into the sand further away and slowly turned around to face the hunter.

The man looked at his weapon. The blade slowly slipped from the hilt then crashed with a screech in the rock crystals.

“How dare you?” he asked, annoyed.

“Marf,” shrugged Gab, weary.

The hunter grabbed his sinclair and made it spin on his right. Even from far away, Gab could see that the blade had been sharpened this very morning. He couldn’t approach as long as he had it. One step at a time, the hunter advanced toward Gab who was stepping back at the same pace. Slowly, he was getting close to the other side of the circular wall.

The hunter threw his weapon and Gab dodged it by leaning on his left. Both tip buried themselves in the stone. His opponent yanked the chain

and it wrapped itself around Gab. He then ran around him a few times to restrain the half-demon. Gab struggled to set himself free but the hunter tightened his grip and proceeded to beat him up.

“I must control myself,” thought Gab. “I can't activate my aura.”

He dived violently to the right. The weapon got unstuck from the wall and Gab used the element of surprise to shove the man.

The half-demon freed himself from the chain. He jumped in the air and used the speed he acquired by falling back down to punch his opponent on the head. A loud crack resonated in the whole Coliseum. The crowd simultaneously held their breath with a horrified exclamation.

The hunter fell in the sand and Gab looked at him, annoyed. That man had every intentions of killing him but he wasn’t fast enough. This is what happened to those who attacked people stronger than them.

“Tom, you’re next.”

Gab headed back to the cell. Misty was scolding Tom for executing the captain.

“I only wanted us to win,” pleaded Tom.

“You could have knocked him unconscious instead of impaling him.”

“Useless,” explained Gab. “The king would have forced him to kill the man. And what’s done is done.”

“My turn!” shouted Asuka.

The guard headed toward her. He opened the door and waited for her to proceed.

“For luck,” she said.

She presented her palm in front of Gab’s face. She obviously wanted him to clap his hand in hers for encouragement. Gab sighed and complied, but she removed her hand and slapped him on the butt instead.

Gab looked at her with perplexity but she entered the arena, giggling. She winked at him while the guard was closing the door.

“You like her,” said Tom.

"Not really. She's my complete opposite: lively, talkative and extroverted. She seems to know more about me than I'd like her to."

"Isn't it what makes her interesting?"

Gab didn't answer. He approached the window and looked at her fight that was about to begin. In front of her was a man of small stature. He must have been one meter fifty. He was slim but very muscular. His clothes were rather simple: white pants and steel shoes. His fingers were covered with the same bandages as Asuka, but it was easy to see that his fists were armored by the same metal covering his feet. His dark brown skin showed that he spent long hours under the scorching sun, training. He brushed his hair with his hand and smiled when he saw his opponent.

As soon as Asuka entered the arena, multiple men from the crowd whistled at her. She frowned and approached the center. She ignored the juvenile behavior and studied her opponent. He wasn't armed. He would probably fight with his fists.

"You're very pretty," he said with a thick accent.

"Sorry, I'm already taken," she lied. "And my boyfriend is way stronger than you."

"Well that's unfortunate!"

He took sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on. Asuka drew a random card but her opponent was faster. He moved behind her and grabbed her by the neck. From her position, Asuka got a better look at his hands. His fists were armored indeed, but a small hook protruded on his right hand extremity, giving him a sixth knuckle.

With a quick motion, passed the hook inside her left shoulder and teared her costume above the breast.

"Dissipation card!"

Asuka started to fade. She was slowly turning into a ghost, like Vince when he was disappearing. The man's hands went through her and she plunged on the sand. She rolled and turned to face her opponent. The ghostly

effect vanished and Asuka regained her opacity.

She looked at her clothes. The tear revealed a small part of her chest. Nothing much but just enough to make her blush.

“Pervert,” insulted Asuka.

“Opportunist,” he corrected.

As soon as she stood up she drew another card, but he was already in front of her. He punched her violently in the stomach and she got the wind knocked out of her. He dragged his fist down and the hook teared her vest from her sternum to her yellow ribbon. The artificial claw also caught her skin and blood soon started to trickle on the sand.

A gust of wind made the thick yellow ribbon fly away outside the Coliseum. Asuka fell on the ground trying to catch her breath. He was too fast. She didn’t have time to summon even one card.

The man grabbed her by the hair and forced her up on her knees. He expressly hit her bosom with his shin and she heard one of her ribs crack. The attack lifted her for the ground and she landed further away, raising a cloud of sand.

“Hmmm, silky” commented her opponent.

What was left of her purple vest was ripped by the kick, unveiling her light pink bra. Usually the ribbon would have kept the kimono closed, but now that it was two kilometers away it wasn’t very useful. Laying on her back, Asuka could see her purple outfit fall off both sides of her body.

“What a dirty fighter,” growled Gab in his cell. “Let me out!”

“Wait for your turn!” ordered the guard.

“It’s unpleasant for us too,” said Tom.

An orange aura slowly started to envelop every limbs of the pervert, as if power was growing there. To show off to the crowd, he kicked the sand at his feet. A gigantic dust column raised over three meters in the air. If he could do that with sand, one hit would easily kill Asuka. Where did that strength came from?

"Card of development."

Like her opponent, a yellow aura of power enveloped her fists and legs. The energy remained around her for a few seconds then dissipated. The cards were failing her. She didn't have the strength to conjur them anymore. Her mana card could have recharged her, but she no longer had it.

"Card of development!" she repeated.

This time, nothing happened. The man was charging at her. He was done toying with her. He wanted to finish the fight and move on. Asuka panicked, and with desperation she tried a third time.

"Card of de…"

A powerful punch rammed into her. Once again, the sound of something ripping could be heard. Asuka flew away and struck the circular wall that exploded under the impact. Rubbles fell on her and covered her body.

"ASUKA!" yelled Gab.

He kicked the door leading to the Coliseum open and headed to the rock slide. The man looked at Gab and a medical team arrived. They had to remove the body from the rubbles before the next fight could begin. Realizing he had won, Asuka's opponent returned to his lodge. Gab ignored him and started to remove the rocks.

After a few minutes he had dug her body out. Her clothes were shredded and her skin was covered with dust and blood, but she was still inexplicably breathing. The punch had only made her unconscious.

"What should we do?" asked a medical team member.

"Notify the king. Pretend that she's dead for the crowd, she will be executed later," answered another.

"Do not touch her!" ordered Gab. "I'll kill you if you do."

"Calm down," said a third medic.

Gab looked at them balefully and bared his fangs. The nurse lifted his palm in front of him and stepped back, petrified. The half-demon grabbed

Asuka under her knees and back and returned toward the cell. He looked at the fortune teller. Her head and arms were hanging backward. In light of his heroic action, a few sobs and amorous sighs could be heard coming from the crowd, but he ignored them with irritation. Once inside, he laid Asuka on her bed. Tom and Misty remained near the gaping hole caused by Gab.

"How is she?" asked Tom.

"That hit should have killed her, but she took it like a champ. She's just groggy."

He covered her partial nudity with a blanket. Their guards came back, this time accompanied by the king himself.

"That was a nice show that you just gave us," complimented the monarch. "But I got wind of her survival. As agreed, she'll be executed."

"No," replied Gab. "I'm still in the run and if I win, I can choose to save her. That's our agreement, isn't it?"

The king thought about it for a while but bowed his head. That's right, it was their agreement.

"Alright, but the next round will be in one hour and you will fight each other," the king pointed at Tom and Gab. "Use this break to recover a bit. In order to prevent you from plotting, we'll lock you up separately."

They could have done it before if they knew how many contestants entered the Coliseum and what the bracket was, but since they were under surveillance at all time, they didn't have that opportunity.

"Your Majesty," called the guard. "What are we doing with the door?"

"Leave it as is, we'll fix it once the tournament is over. The Coliseum is a walled enclosure anyway. Even if they wanted to flee they would be trapped."

The guard bowed down to show that he understood the order. Right after, Tom and Gab were dragged into different rooms and doctors examined them. They needed to be in top shape for their fight. Asuka, under Misty's watchful eyes, was treated by an elven healer. If Gab won she would be

allowed to leave this place right away and in full health, so he had to take care of her.

Once her rib was magically settled back and her wounds were stitched, Asuka woke up. There was only 15 minutes left until the next fight. She looked around for the other two.

"I lost?" she asked.

Misty nodded as an answer. Asuka smiled.

"Then I'm going to die."

"No, Gab took you in charge. He's also the one who saved you."

"Electricity card," smiled Asuka.

"Sorry?" asked Misty.

Asuka shook her head as to tell her to not worry about it. Under her blanket, she reviewed her cards.

"That's what I thought. It didn't come back. I lost another one."

She sat in the bed. The blanket fell, reminding her of her opponent's sleazy behavior. She rummaged in her backpack that she left at the foot of her bed and took another outfit out of it. She couldn't strut around the city in her underwear after Gab's victory.

She asked Misty to act as a screen while she was getting changed. An entire crowd undressed her with their eyes while she was getting humiliated. It was more than enough. She didn't need the guards' input on her very generous bosoms.

The last minutes went by and Tom and Gab were summoned at the center of the arena. The opponents headed there and faced each other. At Gab's feet, something half buried in the sand caught his attention. He bent over, smiled and picked it up. He stored it in his kimono and looked at Tom again.

With no more door to obstruct their view, Misty and Asuka could watch the fight like if they were in the arena too.

Like every prior fights, the prizes were displayed next to the king.

Tom and Gab barely noticed the slave. To be honest, the only thing on their mind was their unfinished fight. They were staring at each other like they could read mind.

"How is your back?" asked Tom. "You think you can do it?"

"It's perfectly fine, the doctor healed all my wounds."

Tom smiled and Gab mimicked him. Both closed their eyes and reopened them right away.

"Don't hold back!" both said.

Tom transformed his hazblades while Gab was simply showing off his claws. Tom didn't owe him anything. Gab may have joined their group but he didn't really considered him a part of it. On top of that, he really wanted to know who was stronger.

Tom rushed to the right while Gab headed in the opposite direction. They ran in circle in the sand. Once the inverted their starting position, both rushed to the center. Tom crossed his hazblades in order to block Gab's claws.

"I admit it, your reflexes are faster," said Gab. "But that is not always enough against brute strength."

He grabbed the blades with his hands and forced Tom's arms open. Gab lifted his foot and kicked his torso. Tom flew back into the dust. He got up immediately, but Gab was already in front of him. Tom struck his swords vertically twice and once again, Gab grabbed them. He was doing the same thing again: after forcing his arms open he tried to push him back.

Tom lifted his knee and Gab's foot deviated to the left. He plunged on his right and grazed his sword against his opponent's ribs.

"I'm getting better," noticed Tom. "Slowly, but I'm improving."

He stood up and charged at Gab. He gave a flurry of blows: verticals, sideways, slanted. Gab was countering every one of them. His claws were hard as steel. Tom tried to pierce through him. Gab had to turn sideways to dodge the strike. His claws couldn't stop the tip of the blade.

He jumped in the air and twirled. Tom threw his hazblades upside-down and caught the handles backward. It was a different fighting style, but he had to use it to shield himself from the half-demon assault. Gab landed behind Tom and tried to bury his claws in his back. Tom unfolded his arms and extended his wrists. The claws stopped in their track.

“Be careful not to break a nail,” taunted Tom.

“You’ve become a pain,” replied Gab, amused. “Are you ready? Or will you fail like always?”

“No! I WON’T fail!”

This insult always enraged him. Like many times before, the grey aura appeared. It pushed Gab back and allowed Tom to turn around and face him. He was slightly panting. They were running and exchanging blows since the beginning of the fight.

Tom charged at Gab who grabbed the hazblades for a third time. Tom opened his arms on purpose and rammed his skull against Gab’s. He hated those head-butts. It was the second in three days. Gab faltered from left to right and tried to regain his sight. Once he was able to see again, he only glimpsed Tom’s foot before it rammed in his face.

The blow was violent. It sent him flying against the circular wall who cracked under the pressure. Tom had charged all of his Ixcross' power into that attack. Into the dusty rubbles, Gab’s red aura lit like a flare. He pounced on Tom and they clashed at the center of the arena before pushing each other away.

“I won’t lose,” said Gab. “I will always stand back up!”

Gab focused his aura in his claws and slashed the air in front of him vertically. About ten small waves flew toward Tom.

He made his hazblades spin in his hands before catching them right side up. He lifted the blades in front of his face and rubbed them together. Rapidly, a grey energ ball started to grow bigger. Once the hazblades tips separated, the sphere exploded in an X shaped beam. It swallowed thre e of

Gab's waves and headed right toward him. The beam rushed into the half-demon and threw him back into the crevice he just got out of. Tom's assault ripped the wall open and dissipated in the plain.

Behind Tom, Gab's missed attacks destroyed the circular wall at different places. One thing was for sure, Gab didn't beat around the bush. If only one of these attacks had touched him, he would have been cut in half.

Tom refocused his attention on Gab and stood still with horror. He had disappeared from the crevice and was replaced by a two meters and a half monster. Through the dust, Tom could distinguish a yellowish white fur under Gab's red and black outfit and red eyes filled with hatred staring at him. Pointy canine were protruding from his mouth. It was a gigantic feline standing on his hind legs. An immeasurable power was emanating from him.

The monster was certainly scary, but what terrified Tom were the numbers in his head. The beast was effortlessly reaching one hundred twenty thousand manas. Tom almost started to scream like Misty did when she was fleeing from the Leviathan.

The beast hissed angrily then moved toward him. He hit Tom who was protecting himself with his hazblades. The strike bounced on the blades and sent him flying in the circular wall. Being thrown would have achieved the same result. The monster was so fast that it was like he was teleporting himself. He ignored Tom and with one jump forward, he crossed the whole arena. He was going toward the royal lodge.

"Protect the king!" ordered a guard.

The soldiers took their weapons out and covered the monarch. On the left, the slave took advantage of the confusion and jumped down the lodge. It was rather high but she fell on a dune and rolled down. She stood up and ran toward Tom. Despite the guard forbidding them to do so, Misty and Asuka joined her in order to help. Tom looked at the feline: he seemed to be searching for someone while the entire crowd was fleeing in total chaos.

"Gab," whispered Tom while standing up.

From a lodge exited the pervert who fought Asuka. The orange aura that could shatter a mountain was still glowing on his fists. The guards probably asked him to help restrain or maybe stop the monster.

The beast saw him and charged. The man wound up his fist and hit the feline once in range. The animal caught it in his paw with ease and stopped it. His raw power was ridiculously exaggerated. Without letting him a chance to retaliate, Gab put his paw on the man's naked torso and like an explosion, a red energy wave emanated from it. Once the ashes disappeared, there was nobody left in front of the beast.

"Ridiculously exaggerated," repeated Tom to himself.

Gab looked at Tom and hissed once again. In a jump he disappeared from the Coliseum.

"Let's go," said Misty. "The plan worked!"

Tom went through the rubbles and exited in the heathland behind the arena then started running again. Next to him, Misty, Asuka and the slaves were following at the same pace. In her head, Misty reenacted their plan.

***

Tom was bent over an unconscious Misty and was whispering in her ear. He gently patted her cheek to wake her up.

"Misty, if you can hear me, shake your eyelids but don't open them," he said.

She complied. What was going on?

"Good," he continued. "We've been captured and we are being forced to kill each other in a tournament. Thanks to his half-demon blood and thanks to her cards, Gab and Asuka can hear me right now. We will build a stage in order to find a solution and escape unhurt. I must ask you to use your powers to stop time and go warn another person. She was captured like us and will become a slave for the winner. Since we're planning on escaping, she will be given to someone else if we leave her here. Can you do that?"

Misty shook her eyelids again. For now, all the questions she had about Noemi would have to wait. She had to play the game.

“Once the guards will enter this room, it will be your signal. Make sure to be fast, your energy supply won’t allow you a lot of time… One last thing. Once you wake up, pretend you don’t know about any of this.”

Tom straightened up. He looked at Gab then at Asuka. His back against the wall, Gab was looking outside and Asuka was pretending to play with her cards. Tom started the scene. In her head, Misty was trying to decipher every sentence.

“What am I going to do with a slave? No offense, but Misty won’t die because of me. If I have to sacrifice you to save her, then so be it. You're so slow. I could go rescue that slave while I’m fighting you off.”

“Save the slave in order to let her join Tom during one of his fight. But which one?” thought Misty.

“You think? You ought to make sure you win against your opponent so that we can finish our fight started at Edanqua. I will smash holes everywhere.”

“Alright,” she analyzed. “So Gab will create a way for us to escape.”

“You never saw my card of speed,” added Asuka. “I could outrun anyone, anyday.”

“And once this opening is created, we’ll flee,” she concluded. “I must go warn the slave. Chronexia!”

“You'll get us kill you know that?” sighed Chronexia. “With two seals, you can only stop time for three minutes.”

“Thank you.”

The guards had entered the room. Misty focused and time stopped. She quickly got out of bed and ran through the door. She went up a flight of stairs four at a time and reached the prison’s second floor. She only found one inhabited in a guarded cell. She stole the soldier’s keys and opened the door. She took a pen and paper out of her pocket. She hastily wrote a note

and put it in the slave's hand.

She closed the cell as fast as she could, replaced the keys and went back to her own room. She laid back in bed and restarted the flow of time after two minutes and thirty-six seconds. Blood rushed to her head and her temples were pounding: she was slowly losing consciousness. Right before she did, she had time to remember the note she wrote:

We are stuck fighting in this tournament. We'll try to rescue you so try to breakaway whenever you'll see the opportunity.

***

Tom was thinking while he ran. For sure the plan worked, but it was so badly conceived. There were some major flaws to it. First, Asuka shouldn't have lost, it almost killed her. Second, the monster Gab transformed into was seriously odd. He never mentioned the beast and it almost killed him. They got pretty lucky. Still fleeing, they left Arenight thanks to Asuka's speed card. Nevertheless, they were still pursued until they reached a wheat field were they could hide. Short of breath, Misty crashed on the ground. Asuka was pumping air like a machine. She just woke up and she had to perform such a big physical effort. Her head was spinning.

Tom sighed and hid behind a rock to make sure that the guards stayed away. They were safe but their team was completely dissolved. Where were Nark, Ryu, Noemi and Gab?

Multiple kilometers away from them, Gab had regained his human form. He was leaning against a tree and was removing the arrows shot by the guards. He gritted his teeth while removing the last one and talked to himself.

"I didn't think my demon would take the upper-hand. This kid really pushed me to my limit. But there is a good side to this. And I'll be able to go visit some old friends."

A smile dawned on his face and it turned into a small laugh.

Chapter 9:
The Sanctuary Tower

In a pitch-black room, a hand grabbed a small and sharp rock. On a rocky wall it nervously traced another vertical mark before dropping its pen. It crashed against the ground and broke in two. The biggest piece stopped at the feet of another individual. The person leaned his back against the rocky wall and let himself slide to the ground.

Outside, a cloud moved and unveiled the moon, but it barely changed the luminosity. The waning moon showed only a small part of itself. The light of this 20th day of the 6th month was highlighting the features on Achille's face.

Once again, he let his eyes wander around his cell. A cage made of brick walls barricaded by steel bars, filled with his ex-colleagues. It was the first time since that night of the 10th month 25 years earlier that they were seeing each other all at once. However the atmosphere wasn't for celebration.

"I'm sorry," said Achille. "I feel like I'm the one to blame for us all being here. I should've stopped him."

Dyol took his hand to reassure him.

"You worry too much," said Aleck. "We were nine when we won against him in 56. He took us by small divided groups. Our chances of winning were close to nil."

"I know," admitted Achille.

"Furthermore," added Krissy, "most of us have stopped fighting a long time ago. Except Aleck, Mack and yourself, we haven't touched our weapons in forever."

"I know," repeated Achille. "But to know that my son is pursuing this

sadist for our sake makes me uneasy…"

"Why?" asked Maxim, harnessed to the lock. "I saw him in action. Obviously he's not at your level, but he manages to trigger his Fae at his age."

"So what?" bragged Mack. "Ryu got his when he was eight years old and he knows how to make it work."

"You think that this is the time for this kind of contest between you two?" reprimanded Suling. "Let's just find a way out of this cell."

"I'm working on it," grumbled Maxime.

"Why?" asked Flora.

A deep silence fell in the cell. Did Flora like this place so much that she wanted to establish her residence here?

"Don't look at me like this. For the first time in thirty years, I get something resembling a vacation. Teacher, architect, archaeologist, scientist, biochemist, theoretician and so much more, they're all tasks that I have to do here and there for the king in exchange of my elf immunity. Our race is still treated like slaves. I can never truly rest. Secondly, I would remind you that we have no weapons to make our escape. Finally, Tom will join us here, won't he? If he came and we're gone? He would put himself in danger for naught, him and everybody else."

"I never wanted Tom to risk his life for us, or anyone else for that matter! For gods' sake! We're the elite and we can't even escape from a cell…"

"Nailed it!" exclaimed Maxime. "So, am I the best or what?"

The door of the cell slid wide open and Maxime gave back the hairpin he had borrowed from Krissy to pick the lock. Achille came out through the hole and they all looked at each other. The youngest tied her hair with the pin and followed the rest of the group outside the dirty bricks. Achille was immediately caught up by Dyol and his team.

"Tom resembles you too much," conceded Flora with a pinch of annoyance.

Achille ignored her. He looked around him. The cell was withdrawn

at the end of a corridor. On the walls, torches had been lit. They followed them until they reached a perpendicalar crossroad.

“Where do we go?”

“Go upstairs, the upper floors are safer,” said Flora while pointing to the right. “I will climb down to the lower floor. This kind of castle is from the years 400, they possess a collapsing device in order to avoid to be captured by enemy. The King used to activate theirs during sieges. I will destroy it.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Aleck.

“No! Go. I’ll join you at the entrance.”

Without waiting, Flora threw herself in the opposite direction. She rushed down a flight of stairs and disappeared behind a pillar.

“She's always been that stubborn. Let’s go,” ordered Aleck.

The group took the stairs indicated by the professor and climbed them running. They reached the first floor and targeted the exit three hundreds meters in front of them. They hurried toward it, but had to stop halfway through.

A horde of soldiers entered the hall from the multiple doors and surrounded them. Achille could see in their eyes that they weren’t humans. They turned around. Above the door they just came through, a stairway climbed on each side of the room like a half-circle. Both parts joined at the center to give access to another stairway ascending to a bigger room.

On the central ramp were five figures hidden under capes. Their cloaks prevented the group to identify any of them. Only Vince had lowered his hood. Higher up on the other set of stairs, another impossible to identify person waited patiently, sitting against the rail.

“We're done, aren’t we?” asked Maxime.

“Yeah,” replied the person at the top.

“Who are you?” interrogated Achille.

“People refer to me as those young people’s ‘master’.”

The master waved its hand horizontally to show the five other figures

in front of it.

“We only need to buy enough time to let Flora activate the self-destruction,” whispered Aleck to his son.

“Don’t bother. That incompetent was neutralized in an instant. You’ll be next. You're causing me way too many problems. Had I not came back to my castle, who knows what would have happened to you? Surely, my generals would have killed you.”

“Isn’t it what you want?” spat Achille.

“Please. Don't flatter yourselves, you're only pawns. Tom is the one he wants,” explained Vince.

The shadow sighed. Closing its fist. The group saw Vince’s throat slightly cave in. An invisible force lifted him off the ground.

“You talk too much. This is exactly why you don’t know my identity. I can’t risk you revealing it to Tom.”

The shadow reopened its fist and Vince crashed on the floor, coughing. He panted for air, but none of the other generals granted him a look.

Achille’s eyes stopped on one of the master’s generals. His rage cumulated itself in an instant. A gold aura exploded in the room and Achille threw himself toward the stairs.

“You!” screamed Achille. “What have you done with my son?”

As soon as Achille reached the first step, an invisible impact sent him back at the group’s feet. He slid on the rock while coughing and his aura turned off with the dust.

“What do you want with Tom?” cried Dyol.

“This isn’t for you to know. But on the other hand, I will need the elite’s help. You see, Tom is not alone, but I’m only interested in him. If you join me, I could use you to kill the rest of his team.”

“You think that we are going to attack our kids?” asked Mack.

“I haven’t seen it this way, but the idea is absolutely delightful.

Anyway this was just a rhetorical request. I just took control over Flora. I possess powers to which you will not be able to resist."

The master raised its hand towards them and immediately, the team lowered their defensive fists. Their heads fell toward the ground, hiding their controlled red eyes. With its free hand, the shadow made them levitate and guided them through one of the castle's window. This time, he wouldn't have to take care of them. Might as well consider them dead since it was their fate anyway.

"I'm leaving again," said the master to its generals. "Sentron, keep searching in Ricena. Layroy, take care of your experiment, he's seriously pissing me off. Vince, you keep an eye on this group but keep a low profile for now. I want every detail. You think you can do that?"

"Yes Master, but won't you go back to them?"

"I have something to pick up first…"

The shadow climbed the stairs and took off its cape. Before one of the generals could uncover its identity, it threw it in the air and disappeared, leaving them alone.

***

West of Arenight, Gab climbed a volcano with numerous jumps. Far away, the sun was setting to end the 20th day of the 6th month. Gab reached the peak and looked at the boiling lava inside the active volcano.

"It's about time I take control of things again."

Gab jumped into the burning den. He landed on a wall and threw himself on the other side. He rebounded on a 50 centimeters platform and continued to dive further down. He ran on the rock and finally landed on a small brittle path made out of clay.

There was a cave in the northern extremity. The temperature was extremely high, only his half-demon status prevented him to succumb to those sixty degrees Celsius. The heat was making his white hair dance, but Gab didn't bother about it.

He entered in the cave illuminated by the magma's light and studied the location. A small man with black skin threw a piece of red hot metal in an oil bucket. His naked chest was shining with sweat caused by the heat and his work. When he saw Gab, he put down his clamps and approached him.

"What can I do for you?"

"Hello, old friend!" replied Gab

It took the blacksmith a while before he recognized him. It was true that the last they saw each other was three years ago, but Gab didn't hold grudge against him. He took out his old sword's hilt that he kept and showed it to him.

"Could you make me another sword? Mine broke and I don't have any, which is slightly annoying if you recall my condition."

The blacksmith took the hilt from his hands and turned it to study it. The piece was surprisingly heavy.

"I could craft a new one for you, but you will have to get rid of this one. It cannot be mended."

"Understood," conceded Gab after a moment. "Don't hesitate to make it heavy."

"It'll take me two days to craft it. Until then, you could visit my brother at the end of the cave. He is training his Fae"

"Fae?" Asked Gab.

"He'll explain if he wants to."

Gab thanked him and took the way indicated by the blacksmith. Before he definitely left, he remembered a detail. He stopped and came back on his track. While searching in his kimono, Gab took a piece of paper that he presented to him.

"I forgot," added Gab. "Would you be able to fix this as well?"

Once again the blacksmith studied the object.

"I can even make it better. However, I don't have any paper here so I'll have to create an amulet out of it. Would this be convenient for you?"

“Thank you very much,” approved Gab

Without digressing any deeper, Gab dashed in the daze of detours. The labyrinth of corridors brought him to a lake of glowing red water. To its heart floated many rocks with burning base and blacked peaks. On one of them sat a fakir, legs crossed. Around him was a shining teal aura.

“Abraham Menslow, right?” hesitated Gab.

The aura disappeared and the room lost some of its luminosity. Gab used his arm to wipe his forehead. The ambient temperature was near 45 degree Celsius. The man on the rock stood up and jumped toward him. His jumps were human, nothing exaggerated like his or Tom's.

When he arrived next to Gab, the fakir stared him up. He had brown pupil that exhaustion made nervous. He looked at Gab from top to bottom and the half-demon mimicked him. The fakir was wearing a white turban on his head, a gray beard and a toga covered in soot.

“Gab,” he replied with a deep tone.

“Always ready for a training. Your brother told me that I could bother you.”

“He said that?”

The Fakir seemed shocked but not surprised

“Not in those words, but apparently you know what a Fae is and I have two days to spare. Nothing is forcing you to teach me, but I could definitely learn a thing or two.”

“Understood,” flinched Abraham. “But tomorrow morning. For now we sleep.”

“I never sleep,” claimed Gab, falsely annoyed.

“Now you do. You'll get better acuity when you wake up and it make the time go by faster, so sleep would you?”

Despite the cold between them, Gab was having fun.

“*Oh well, I only have to sleep two days and I’ll get back to my usual routine afterward,*” thought Gab.

Gab laid down on a rock bed and trashed around for a long time. To sleep, he only had to close his eyes and wait, right? Hours were passing by and after a while, Gab stopped counting them.

Tom was in front of him. He was on all fours and was bleeding from multiple injuries. His left knee was blown out, dried magma had blackened his skin at a few places and cuts lacerated his body. His clothes were nothing more than rags. They were still holding together, but were becoming more troublesome than anything else.

“You’re not too bored, Tom? I bet that you can’t wait to see me again.”

“Go to hell! I will never forgive you for killing them all.”

“Nah, I didn’t think so.”

A metallic noise resounded in the room. For a fraction of a second, a reflect collided against the metallic blade and illuminated Gab’s eye, but Tom didn’t see it. In this darkness, he was alone. He had lost everything and this death, he was wishing for it, no, he was waiting for it. Like a drug, this needle was allowing him to escape from an imminent reality.

Tom fell to the ground and blood spread on the rocky floor. The puddle reached Gab’s feet and stained his boots.

“Disappointing,” whispered Gab.

***

Tom woke up in the middle of a wheat field. A cardiac contraction startled him in his sleep. The dream still haunted him. Tom had stopped counting them, it was useless. In the sky, a small ray of moonlight was lighting the third hour of this 21st day of the 6th month. At his side were Misty, Asuka and the slave they had saved last evening.

After fleeing Arenight, they took refuge in a wheat field and had waited for the grunts to abandon their search. While Tom was spying, the three girls fell asleep. The presence of guards around them prevented the exchange of any words.

When they left, Tom fell asleep. He didn't see the purpose of waking them up since it was dusk. Now Tom was turning and tossing in the strands of wheat searching for the sleepiness he had just lost, but the unconscious fear of having this nightmare again was preventing him to find it. On the other hand they had slept for nearly nine hours.

With that thought in mind, Tom decided to wake up his partners. He went to Misty first, he shook her softly, almost lovingly. He whispered her name to wake her up. In her sleep, she replied with his name. Tom smiled and insisted further. She finally woke up. Still tired, she rubbed her eyes and asked him the reason why he woke her in what she considered such a brutal fashion.

"We've been sleeping for nine hours. It's not good to sleep too much."

"But the sun isn't up yet," she pleaded.

"Come on," smiled Tom

Misty reluctantly got up. Tom woke up Asuka and the other 18 years old woman. Once Tom had everybody's attention, he explained the trouble they were in.

"What are we doing now?"

None of the three replied. The stranger didn't had her place in this team, but for now, no one paid attention to it.

"What are our options?" inquired Asuka in a yawn.

"Well first we could try to find Gab, Nark, Ryu and Noemi?" offered Tom

"We could also search for some info about Vince, but on this continent there's only Arenight – that we seem to be banished from – two seals and an elfish village up north," added Misty while reading the map Flora gave her.

"I would like to return home," chimed in the blond.

Tom looked at her for the first time.

“Where is that? And what’s your name?”

“I live near the sphere of life. It is a few kilometers north-east from here. I am one of the two guardians of the goddess Mana, my name is Pearle.”

“This mean we're very close to the Darkness sanctuary?” asked Misty.

Pearle nodded.

“Yes. The sanctuary is located about five kilometers to the east. Do you have business there?”

“Yes,” replied Tom. “Tell me, Pearle, do you know how to fight? And do you mind if we make a detour to this sanctuary?”

“I don't mind, but you’ll have to spare yourselves of my services. I don't have that kind of skills.”

“Understood,” concluded Tom. “Since we won’t find anything about Vince here and that we have no idea where to look for the others, there’s only the seals left. As soon as we drop Pearle, we will reorganize our tasks.”

Tom gathered his backpack and left in the direction of the seal. Misty followed while yawning and the two other women closed the trail. The sanctuary appeared in the dark one hour later. They had to climb a hill to reach the entrance. The sanctuary was covered by a gray dome with pillars on the side. The place was gigantic. According to Misty, this was one of the biggest seals of Mana. Its height was approximately 350 meters. It was so high, they wondered if once, humans could have built such a structure.

Two doors carved with motifs led inside. Tom put his hand on them, but Misty seemed nervous.

“Are you alright?” asked her Tom.

“I don’t like the dark,” she admitted. “Can we wait for daylight before we venture inside?”

“It wouldn’t change anything,” replied Pearle. “This seal is drenched in darkness day and night. At least if we go in at night our eyes are used to the darkness, it would be brighter in a sense.”

Tom pushed the door and entered the sanctuary. The lack of light was obvious. Outside, the moon crest was directing them, but there was nothing of the sort between these walls. Tom fumbled forward. Behind him, Misty was grabbing his shoulder. As Pearle said, it was difficult to see, but possible. Making their way through the corridor, they ended up in a bigger space. In front of them appeared a big circle. Tom climbed in with the three girls and the circle started to raise up in the air. Around them, metallic bars encircled them.

“What’s this?” asked Tom

“An elevator. It’ll bring us to see Lurk,” replied Pearle.

Three minutes later, the elevator immobilised itself and the bars disappeared. Tom climbed off and studied the place. A dazzling light was surrounding him. It was prisoner of a single lamp and illuminated a major part of the place. Around the lamp was built an infernal tower which disappeared in the depth of darkness.

Tom flinched and grabbed his hazblades. In front of him was the man of his nightmares. He was leaning against the lamp and was holding a crystal ball in his hands. Driven by an impulse, Tom rushed toward the man.

“Tom?” called Misty.

“Stop!” ordered Pearle.

Tom didn’t listen to her. Around him his grey aura fought the light emitted by the lamp. When he was within reach of the man, Tom struck. The man raised a smile and moved his crystal ball. An invisible energy stopped the Tom’s hazblade and a detonation pushed him back to the girls. Tom coughed while trying to catch his breath.

“Are you the master?” asked Tom.

“No. There’s is only one and unique Boss and this is certainly not me.”

Pearle ignored Tom and ran to the man who was wearing a cape. She kneeled in front of him and promptly apologized for Tom’s behavior.

“My apologies, O mighty Lurk. He must have confused you with someone else.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” laughed the god. “Don’t make such a scene Pearle. Tell me, boy, you’ve got a lot of guts to take on a god.”

“And why is that?”

“We're immortals, no human can make an attempt on our life.”

“You wanna bet?” defied Tom.

Obviously, Tom still believed that he was the man of his dreams, but he slowly convinced himself otherwise. His attitude, his voice and his style were very different from the ones in his dream. In his dream, the shadow wanted to kill him, he couldn’t tell if the voice belonged to a man or a woman and it had a jagged sword, not a crystal ball.

Tom sheathed his weapon and approached. Misty and Asuka followed silently.

“Why such an early visit this morning? Where is Mana? You never come without her.”

“These people wanted to meet you. Since they saved me, I felt like I owed them this much.”

Lurk faced the team and introduced himself by bowing deeply. His attitude was similar to the one of a noble with a perfect education. If he had one, he would probably have removed his hat out of respect, but his whole body was made of an immaterial cape. He was the exact definition of a ghost. Only his crystal ball had a complete and real opacity.

“Pleased to meet you, ” chimed Misty. “I am a goddess in training and I would like to take on your challenge.”

“Certainly. My challenge consist in surpassing the human condition. You must climb to the top of this metallic structure and come down using the central elevator.”

“Climb? That's it?” asked Misty.

“And not fall down, obviously. The higher you’ll be, the more

slippery it'll get, there will be less light and the beams will be thinner."

"Must I climb alone?"

"No, your guardians can tag along, but you must be the one who goes down through the central elevator."

Misty nodded as a sign of comprehension. She looked at the tower and studied it. Where to start? At the base, the structure had four steel legs equipped with a rusty ladder on each. It was going up for 50 meters and then disappeared, leaving only the beams. The metal twisted on 200 meters. Further up, the beam were curving toward the inside.

"You want to climb this?" panicked Asuka.

The lamp's light illuminated the beads of sweat covering her.

"Yes," affirmed Tom. "Is that a problem?"

"I have vertigo, I'm afraid of heights," she confided.

"You don't have to come," said Misty. "This is my challenge, Nark and you already helped me last time and I'm grateful, but you don't owe me anything."

"Nark was the one who made you win. I simply helped. I'll be fine, I just need a second to shake it off."

Asuka took out her deck of card and randomly picked one. She walked toward the lamp and laid it on the floor next to it.

"Here we go, the arrival card," she said. "If ever I panic, I'll be able to use my card of departure to come back here."

"Convenient," noted Tom.

He replied without real interest. He had already started to climb the tower. For him, this challenge was also a chance to prove himself to Misty, to show her he was as good as a god. If he completed this trial and all the ones to come, he could claim himself to the divine title. Not officially but he would know himself on their level and that would be plenty.

"One last thing," added Lurk. "Try not to fall asleep. You seem like good people, so be careful."

Fall asleep? Wouldn't it be difficult to fall asleep during such an activity? Asuka was too afraid of heights, Tom was too excited by this simple project and Misty way too nervous because of the trial itself.

Misty grabbed the same ladder as Tom earlier. She reached its top with little trouble. Few minutes later, Asuka finished to climb it too. They were now standing on a wired platform with a hole in the center that allowed the elevator to go down.

Already at this height, the light of the lamp had weakened. In a 100 meters, they wouldn't see it anymore. Asuka was slightly shaking. With all of her will, she fought the impulse to look down.

"Is there a trick to cure vertigo?"

"Focus on what you do," explained Tom. "Turn your attention on something specific. Gab told me of your fear when we went to the Water city."

"Really?" she said, surprised. "But I haven't told him anything."

"He must have sensed it. He's a half-demon after all."

Tom climbed on the edge of a ramp and grabbed a transversal bar. He hauled himself up on the beam and winked at Misty. She followed Tom's lead.

"And he likes your cards. He thinks that it goes well with your ninja style," added Misty.

The compliment made Asuka blush, even though Misty was lying.

"By the way, that reminds me," she continued. "You mentioned that you own a speed card before the tournament, why haven't you used it at the Water city?"

"It's a fickle card," replied Asuka. "The further away my targets are from each other, the faster it saps my energy."

Without realizing, she grabbed Tom's outstretched hand and he hauled her onto the beam. They walked and maintained balance until they reached two beams: one was vertical and the other was angled. Tom climbed and held out his hand to the girls in order to help them. Meanwhile, Asuka

continued her explanations on the cards she had.

Asuka's lighting weakened. The card was mostly used to blind enemies. Once it was used, the light dimmed. Misty climbed on the beam above her head and helped Asuka. Tom let them get a bit ahead while he screened their surroundings. Once they reached the next platform, Tom decided to join them. Five minutes later, he had reached their level. If he didn't have to wait for them, Tom would have considered this challenge rather easy.

"Is there a problem?" asked Tom.

"There's no more platform after this one. It's only beams until the end," explained Misty. "Do you want to stop?"

Her question was addressed to Asuka. Tom looked at her. Because of the lack of light, he didn't see how nervous she was. But now that she was lit by her card, he couldn't deny that she fought her sickness with all the strength she had. Her hair was soaked, she had sweat stains under her armpits and her eyes constantly trembled in their orbit. She kept her hand clenched on her departure card.

"No I... I can keep going."

"I'll go ahead," said Tom. "Go at your own pace, I'll be at the front."

They started their ascension again. As agreed, Tom stayed ahead until they reached a strange part of the tower. It was conceived so the travelers had to cross the 20 centimeters wide beams laterally to reach the other side and to continue to climb. Tom stopped right before that part and waited for the girls. He had heard another noise identical to the first two.

"I'm so exhausted," said Misty. "We should have waited for the sunrise."

"Shh," commanded Tom. "This time I'm sure it's here."

In the darkness appeared a deformed figure. It floated above a beam. Tom unsheathed his hazblades and jumped from beam to beam to reach the shadow who was whispering in an atrocious voice.

Tom struck the beast with his sword but it stopped the blow with its long claws. Tom examined it more closely. Its skin was putrefied, it had bulging eyes red as rubies and a greenish ragged cape. To its hip hanged an open bag filled with silver sand.

“I won’t let you stop us.”

With its free hand, the monster grabbed a hand full of sand and threw it at Tom’s face who immediately lost his strength. His eyes became heavy.

“What is th…”

Unable to stop himself, Tom fell on the side and dropped down one floor.

“Tom!” yelled Misty

Thanks to Asuka’s light, the two girls saw Tom’s back crash onto a sideway beam on his way down. He flipped headfirst and his face and arms crashed on another one. He dropped down another floor and this time his ribs took the hit. He disappeared in the darkness, but the metallic noises could still be heard. Finally, they stopped with a loud crash on the wire mesh of their most recent platform.

“TOM!”

No one answered and Misty turned toward Asuka.

“What was that!?”

Asuka searched for the monster, but she couldn’t find him anywhere.

“The sandman? I hope Tom's alright…”

“Let’s help him,” pressed Misty.

“No you have to complete your trial first. He's going to be fine, so let's end this. You want to help him or not?”

“And your vertigo?”

“It’ll be fine! Let’s hurry.”

The adrenaline started to pour in their body, Asuka started to run on the beams. She jumped from one to another and continued her way toward

the end of the route. It was the same things she learned during her ninja training. She only had to imagine herself at the ground level and it was identical. She always had a phenomenal agility and the fact that she couldn't see the height anymore helped her greatly with her vertigo issue.

Asuka grabbed a transversal bar and threw herself in the void. She grabbed a second one and pulled herself up of one floor. She came back on her way and helped Misty to join her. In the distance, they could vaguely see the elevator.

They only had to cross one more time and they would be there. The sandman appeared again. Directly in front of Misty. Like for Tom, it threw a handful of silver dust in their faces. Asuka took a small dagger out and sliced her own thigh, but like her friend before, Misty fell asleep and crashed on her side.

"Misty!"

Asuka plunged on the beam and grabbed her by the wrist. In front of her, the sandman floated away and headed down of a floor. He made a wide turn in order to tackle Misty. If Tom had been in Asuka's place, he could have launched her back up with one swing of his shoulder thanks to his Ixcross, but she didn't possess such strength.

"Wake-up!"

Misty remained asleep. In the distance, the sandman was closing in dangerously. He was about to crash in her when a grey spark dazzled the scene. From the inferior floor, Tom threw himself and tackled the sandman in the chest with his hazblades. They fell in the central hole reserved for the elevator and the sandman disappeared in the darkness.

"Misty! Wake up, dammit!"

"Sorry!" replied Misty with a voice completely free of tiredness. "It seems like I'll be the one who finishes this trial."

At the bottom of the tower, Tom crashed on the monster and bounced back. This time, they were perfectly illuminated. Facing each other,

the sandman tried to throw some sleeping powder at him again, but Tom avoided the cloud. He dodged to the side and slashed its chest. With his second sword, he got up and stabbed its back. He withdrew it immediately, and gave a last vertical strike with his black hazblade.

A huge blood spatter stained the floor while the monster fell, lifeless. Pearle and Lurk joined him.

“Are you alright?” asked Pearle. “You're covered in blood and your leg is broken.”

“I'll be fine, I swear” winced Tom. “In an hour or two my Ixcross will heal the flesh wounds. Until then, the pain keeps me awake.”

In the distance, they heard a mechanical noise and the elevator came down the middle. Misty was inside accompanied by Asuka. When she got out, she ignored Tom and headed toward the god.

“I succeeded, unlock my third seal,” she ordered.

Lurk inclined the head in sign of compliance and unlocked it. The luminous beam gave an exact representation of Misty’s ghost. This time she was asleep. The light disappeared inside Misty and she fainted. Tom caught her before she hit the ground.

“Thank you.” said Tom to Lurk.

“It was a pleasure” he said while bowing. “I hope we will meet again.”

Behind them, a door opened loudly. Light seeped in the Darkness sanctuary. Tom could hardly walk so he gave Misty to Pearle, who loaded her on her back while Tom used Asuka as a crutch to exit the seal.

Once outside, they noticed the sun was up. They didn’t exit through the same way they came in. In front of them was a long slope leading downward to a field that stretched as far as the eye could see. The only thing troubling this scene was the blue sphere of life which was spinning on itself in the distance. When he saw it, Tom smiled and collapsed. He had no more strength.

He woke up the next day beside the gigantic sphere. The place was

more crowded than he would have imagined. He saw Misty, awake this time, Asuka and Pearle. Two more women were standing in the background. One had hair brown as bark and tired eyes and the other was wearing an Amazonian outfit. The person who shocked Tom the most was the man alongside them. His yellow outfit, his short brown hair, he knew him to well.

“Nark!”

“Ah, Tom! You're finally awake,” he replied with a smile. “Asuka told me what happened.”

“What happened to you? I thought you were dead.”

“When I got out of the circle created by that man – hum I can’t remember his name – Anyhow, I collapsed very close from this place. Sophitia…” he designated the Amazonian with his head “found me and brought me here where she summoned Mana…” Nark pointed the other one “to heal me. Pretty effective, right? It left no marks.”

“Haha!” said Tom, pleased. “Well at least that's one person found.”

“I hope you don't mind,” teased Nark.

“We were waiting for your awakening. We need your approval,” said Misty to Tom.

“My approval for what?”

“I would like to tag along,” revealed Pearle. “But since I don't know how to fight, I wouldn’t be very useful so I talked with Mana about it.”

“And what have you concluded?”

“We could do a permanent Full Sync.” explained Mana. “F.U.L.L. Sync. means Force of Universal Life Linking Synchronised. It’s a fusion. Usually, such unification is extremely difficult to create between two humans and only lasts a few minutes, but since I am the energy goddess, under a specific condition, I can make this fusion last eternally.”

“And what would be the condition?” asked Tom curious.

“We would need a material object to serve as a link. I can easily create it, but if this item was to be destroyed, the body of this fusion - in this

case Pearle - would die. Otherwise she would be immortal."

"I don't see any inconvenient," replied Tom.

"One more thing," added Mana. "The fusion is a mix of Pearle and I. It means that the result will be neither her nor me. We will become a complete different entity and therefore many modification may occur."

Tom nodded with consent and haste. He wanted to see this fusion. How could two persons melt into one another?

Mana focused for a moment and she lost he tired look. Her entire body became white as pure as light and without warning, she crashed into Pearle with incredible speed as if a strong magnet drawn her inside her guardian. Tom had to cover his face to avoid being blinded by the light.

When he could see again, the two body had fused into one. In front of them was standing an 18 years old woman with hair blond like the sun. They were tied in a ponytail who dropped down to the middle of her naked shoulders. As clothing, she was simply wearing a teal puffing low-rise pants and a strapless bra of the same color. Her top was covering her breasts and was wrapped around her body with one piece of material.

Above her head, the fusion brandished the item mentioned by Mana. It was a gigantic mace inlaid with some of the most precious jewels in the world. Made of gold, the mace was decorated with diamonds, topazes, rubies, sapphires, opals, amethysts and emeralds. This weapon seamed indestructible, but convoluted by every thieves around.

The fusion lowered her jewel, closed her eyes, tilted her head sideways and smiled purely and simply.

Chapter 10:
Territorial Delimitation

Tom grunted. The fusion had just been created and even before he could utter a word, ask a simple question, Nark had sent him to fetch wood to feed the fire cooking their supper. Nightfall was upon them when Tom finally came back, arms full of branches and twigs. Nark was rather funny in his own way. He had sent him fetch wood in a plain. Convenient, wasn't it? Good thing that Mana had mended his leg before the fusion.

Tom was talking to his consciousness like he had a correspondent, his rage making him talk out loud to himself.

"I remember now why I didn't miss him. He's trying to steal Misty from me and sends me at the other end of the continent. So unfair," he sighed. "It's almost disloyal."

Tom wasn't really angry, he just really wanted to meet the fusion. Once he came back to the camp, everybody was busy with something. Tom didn't have the chance to talk with the new addition to their group until after supper. Sitting around his proud fire, the conversation was lively for most of them but the fusion didn't utter a word. Her silence was probably due to the awkwardness of the situation and Tom volunteered to break the ice. Mana had explained to him that she had no memories that she was like a new born.

"Good evening," said Tom, waving his hand. "My name's Tom. We didn't get a chance to talk yet."

He combed his hair gallantly with his hand and smiled with as much charm as he could. The fusion looked at her gold mace and repeated his name with her lips, but no sound came out.

"You're not the talkative type, right? Do you have a name?" he asked

kindly.

She seemed lost in thought for a moment, then she tilted her head on the side, closed her eyes and smiled like she did after being created. It was definitely the facial expression he liked the most. Her very own smile, he admitted.

“Tom?” hesitated Misty. “She’s mute.”

“Oh really!” said Tom like he had just insulted her. “So she doesn’t have a name?”

“Does it bothers you that much?” asked Asuka. “How about Elizabeth?”

“Nah I don’t like it,” confessed Tom. “She doesn’t look like an Elizabeth.

“Andrea then?”

“No. We need something more personal. She’s a fusion between Mana and Pearle, right? Why not Marle?”

Misty didn’t really pay attention to his pun. She chose to pursue her debate with Nark about how she thought a democratic government would have a positive outcome while he advocated the actual monarchy. Asuka was grumbling that she loved the names she offered but didn’t oppose Tom. He would have kept the one he chose anyway. The fusion seemed delighted of her baptism and smiled like she always did: head tilted, eyes closed. Marle’s smile.

“What are we doing tomorrow?” asked Asuka.

“I would like to know what Ryu did with Noemi,” said Tom, annoyed.

He had kept that for himself for a while now, but this detail was really frustrating him. Leaving Arenight to take her away form this crazy city made sense, but to disappear for more than two days was irritating. Especially for Tom who didn’t trust Ryu at all.

“Don’t worry,” answered Asuka. “My brother may be mysterious, but he knows what he’s doing. Noemi should be safe.”

"The word 'should' doesn't man anything."

"We are close enough from the Earth seal. Could we stop there?" asked Misty after reading her parchment. "I know that we are preoccupied by Noemi and Ryu's situation, but we have no clue of where they could be hiding right now. Maybe with half the seals unlocked I'll have enough energy to find them?"

"That's also what you said when Noemi's life was in danger…"

Tom stopped mid-sentence. His rage against Ryu was seeping onto his friends. Nark gave him a mean look and Asuka seemed like she was holding it back. Misty was doing her best to help him find Vince and Noemi at the same time, but Tom didn't know what he wanted anymore.

"Why don't you take the night off, Tom?" offered Nark in a dry tone.

His sentence was hurtful and insulting, but to answer him would mean to lose what was left of his dignity. Tom stood up and apologized to Misty. He then turned around and headed to his tent. Tomorrow they would go to the Earth seal and then they'd try to find Noemi. Misty was completely right. He should listen to her more often.

Tom encountered Marle after waking up. The grass was still wet due to the rain that fell during the night. She smiled and Tom apologized. He drank some of the rain water collected in the vases left by Nark and intended for this purpose. He then started to dry his waterproof canvas so that they wouldn't rot in his bag.

"Sorry for making a scene yesterday," said Tom. "It doesn't give you a very warm welcome."

She shook her head as to say that it was nothing. To seek forgiveness, he started the breakfast preparations. Marle happily helped him but everybody had already forgotten about it. Once everyone had a bite, they headed toward the Earth seal. If they were quick enough, they would get there in the late afternoon.

***

“Fae means Feeling producing Assessable Energy,” explained Abraham. “In simpler words, everyone has a feeling that makes them vibe. The more you let yourself be filled with that emotion, the stronger your aura pulse.”

“And what causes the color?” asked Gab.

Gab listened intently to these explanations. Usually, he wasn’t interested in the theory side of things, but this time he needed it to move on.

“If you want to know the details,” sighed Abraham. “When you feel that emotion, your body will secrete adrenaline-like toxins. You may feel your hair standing under the pressure of your Fae. Anyway, the toxins mix with your blood and is expelled through your skin’s pores. That’s what creates the aura. Every toxin is different depending of the feeling. That’s what creates the different colors. For example, some people could have an anger toxin and the angrier they get, the stronger the aura is. Some people are able to estimate this power. They digitize it to make it understandable, but in reality it’s only an approximation of what they’re feeling.”

“More specifically?”

“An aura causes some pressure on the surround bodies or items. Some people feel that pressure, some don’t. The numbers that describes it are in the thousands.”

“And what would be the maximum?”

“In theory, there is no cap. The stronger the emotion, the bigger the aura. There are some talks about someone who managed to reach a hundred thousand manas, the unit of measure, a few decades ago.”

“Who was it?” asked Gab.

“Someone named Norfair. More recently, about thirty years ago, a certain Mack Starz reached ninety thousand manas, but it was an isolated incident. Other significant observations are in the forty thousand, sometimes fifty.”

“So I only got to go over a million then,” shrugged Gab.

The fakir burst out laughing. He dried a tear at the corner of his eye and turned his back to Gab.

“This is just a theory but it is said that if you go over three hundred thousand manas, your body will turn to ashes.”

“Someone has to do it in order to prove them wrong. Come on, let’s start.”

Gab was about to head onto the magma lake when a memory stopped him. He knew he was one of those people that could read others’ power. He had Layroy to thanks for that. But that wasn’t what he cared about. He remembered the beach after the apocalypse. He had clearly read a hundred and twenty thousand manas in Tom… It must have been a mistake. Gab shook his head and jumped on the first stone to face Abraham.

***

Tom, Misty, Nark, Asuka and Marle had just arrived in front or the Earth seal entrance. According to Misty’s map, it was a temple. Tom thought it was more like a cave than a temple but if it was like that on the map… He had chosen Marle’s name yesterday, he very well could leave that cave be a temple for all he cared.

The whole day, Tom happily narrated to Marle all the events starting from his parent’s kidnapping and up to her creation, down to the smallest detail. She had listened to him attentively and only nodded when he asked her some rare questions to see if she was still following. An hour before reaching the Earth Temple, he had finished his story without missing a single detail. Of course he had omitted his nightmares, but it was only so that she wouldn’t worry.

Now, the five of them were standing in front of the temple’s entrance. Misty was her usual nervous self, but Tom’s smile reassured her.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said with confidence.

He entered the temple and made his way forward in the single corridor. Behind him, the remaining of the group moved on with careful

concern. The narrow corridor enlarged itself into a circular room. In the center, a small altar had been sculpted to allow people to pray. Once she deemed the room safe, Misty stepped forward.

Behind them, a rock started to move. It stood up and joined them with heavy steps. Its rocks took an orange tint and black piercing eyes appeared in the sockets of its head. The monster was about three meters high but it was holding its weight proudly. Judging it like a menace, Tom interposed himself between it and Misty. The golem ignored him and made its way behind the altar. On its right, Marle kneeled solemnly like Pearle did in the Darkness sanctuary.

“Are you the god of this place?” asked Asuka.

“Terra is my name. What do you want from me?”

“I want to become a goddess,” explained Misty, shaking.

Terra studied her with his piercing eyes. He raised a rock instead of an eyebrow and shook his head in negation.

“Absolutely not. I have no interest in that kind of things, especially when it involve a kid who doesn’t know what she’s in over her head.”

Misty closed her eyes and sighed. In an instant her behavior changed. Her tone became more convincing and a mocking expression took over her face.

“You owe me a tryout. What would the Boss says if he learned that you're not doing your job properly?”

“This is my domain, the Boss has no veto power here. I do what I please. But alright. If you think you’re so valiant, I’ll let you defy my element.”

“It’s all I’m asking for. Sadly I don’t have enough energy right now to do it alone. My host will do it.”

Once again, Misty closed her eyes. Her insecurity reappeared instantly.

“Alright,” agreed Terra. “My challenge is that you must protect your

companions for 300 seconds. If they all survive, you'll pass."

Terra lifted a stone arm and the ground liquefied into mud. Little by little, at the back of the room, trap doors opened and gust of wind gushed through the place. The storm raised the mud and it splashed everything in its wake. If their feet weren't submerged, they would have been lifted by the wind too.

Under the wind hatches, another door opened. It was much bigger than the ones before and from it, a brown skinned man with the head of a bull made its entrance. Flora had described this kind of beast as a Minotaur during her classes.

"I almost forgot," added Terra. "You must complete this challenge alone."

"What!" panicked Misty. "B… but why? They were allowed to help me for the other seals!"

"Maybe, but it's my trial and you are the challenger. You want to prove yourself, not them so you have to be the one who completes it. Gravity will be three time stronger than usual."

Terra lifted his second stone arm and an invisible force threw Tom face first in the mud. The level wasn't very high, but it was still covering half his face. To breathe, Tom had to close his mouth and let the air in from the corner of his lips. It wasn't a very practical situation, but from the corner of his eyes, he could see that Asuka and Nark were in the same predicament. Only Misty was still standing.

"I suggest that you dispose of it before it kills you or you friends," explained Terra.

"Can you specify who is affected by that gravity?" she asked.

She was trying to buy some time. She wasn't under the same gravity as her companions. To be honest she was looking for a way to win against that two meters ax wielding monster. She had to face her biggest problem again: she had to kill. She was unable to. The idea of taking a life, even an

animal's, made her feel sick to her stomach.

"Of course. The earth's powers are my elements."

"Then why is Marle still standing?" she asked.

"I guess she's very strong," answered Terra. "You have four minutes left to survive. You should start moving."

Misty turned her head toward Marle but she was standing on her feet, knees barely bent and smiling her usual way. The stunned look on her face gave Misty the impression that she was stupidly naive.

"Can you help me?" she pleaded.

Marle shook her head with sadness. She was following Terra's will. Mana being a part of her, she knew what it was like to be a goddess. She couldn't make things easier for Misty.

In front of Misty, the Minotaur was still moving forward. She lifted her arm to try to stop the monster with her time control. Instead, she was splashed by mud in the face and choked on it. The Minotaur was still advancing. Slowly it was moving against the storm. Misty was overwhelmed with panic again. Why were her powers failing her?

"Nobody told you?" asked Terra.

Pity could be heard in his bass voice. He sighed when he saw she wasn't paying attention to him and that she was trying again.

"In the realm of gods, the seals, divine powers don't work. We call that the territorial delimitation. In other words, any other god entering here is powerless. Each god has his own domain where the others cannot do anything. That's the Boss' rule."

"What!" raged Misty.

"Try to buy some time and I'll take care of it," said Tom.

In the mud, he was moving his hands around in order to find support on the ground. If the gravity was three times stronger and his weight was 84 kilos, in order to stand up he had to lift 250 kilos. It was nothing for him and his Ixcross.

Tom pushed on his palms and took his face out of the mud. He looked at Misty with all the will he could muster.

“I only ask you for a minute or two, until I get used to this gravity. I will keep my promise, I swear.”

Misty looked away. Her eyes landed at her feet and she lifted them slowly toward the Minotaur. She had regain a bit of confidence. Tom was with her. He would help her, like he always did. She had been training with him for 10 years now. She knew how to fight.

“Buy some time? I’m its goddess.”

With a sharp movement, she drew the boomerangs she was keeping in holsters tied to her thighs and ran in the mud. Handfuls of dirt were flying in the storm, but Misty analyzed them. Despite the chaos, the mud was going in one direction. Avoiding them was child’s play as long as she kept moving. She didn’t have to kill the monster, only to keep it busy. Flesh wounds wouldn’t kill. She would be able to buy some time.

“Three minutes,” announced Terra.

She plunged on her left to dodge the Minotaur’s enormous ax. The beast was right-handed, which provided her a perfect opening. With her boomerang’s sharp edge, she cut it on the ribs. The beast moaned. It was rather slow. Taking its weapon out of the mud, the Minotaur tried to slice Misty horizontally.

She instinctively threw herself backward, sucking in her stomach. The blade brushed against her navel, leaving a trail of blood stains on her light pink clothes. From the corner of her eyes, Misty glimpsed at Tom. He was on his knees, fighting to stand on one foot.

“Two minutes.”

“I won’t leave her alone, I promised her!”

Around Tom, the gray aura could be traced in the mud. It surrounded his body and vibrated while creating muddy waves. He leaned on one knee. Shaking, he managed to stand on his feet. Terra frowned with his

rock eyebrows.

"You got some guts kid," he said. "Since the beginning, I increased the gravity affecting you five-fold."

But it didn't matter. Tom didn't pay any attention to the god. Misty needed him and no matter what happened, in this type of situation he would help her. He had made a promise.

Tom unstuck his foot from the mud. He faltered under the effort and his feet were forced a bit apart. He would get used to it. Gab wouldn't have any issues in that situation, but of course he wasn't around. This thought led his spirit astray. The last time he saw him, he had turned into that diabolical beast. What happened to him? Would he ever see him again?

Misty's scream brought him back to reality. She had collapsed when the storm had sent a flying rock that hit her in the head.

"One more minute."

She was still conscious but disoriented. Above her, the Minotaur had lifted its ax and was ready to bring it down on her. The blow would split her in half, like it had for a great number of contestant before her. That's why Terra was so uninterested in those trials. Most people failed.

"Tom!" screamed Misty.

That was the push the swordsman needed. In a gray impulse, Tom found himself between her and the monster. His hazblades crossed above his head were under the weight of the beast's weapon and the five-fold increased gravity. He was shaking under the pressure. Without his aura and his Ixcross, he would be flattened in an instant.

Misty was groggy. She stumbled and fell face first in the mud. She could hear Terra call the end of the five minutes time limit, but the beast didn't stop. With a kick, the Minotaur sent Tom flying against some rocks. He crashed on his back under the pressure. Mud filled his mouth and he choked. The animal grabbed its ax and aimed at Misty.

The Minotaur started to build its momentum, but suddenly stopped.

Its ax slipped from its hands and fell in the mud behind it. There was a gaping hole in the middle of its face. What had caused it finished its course stuck in a rock. The Minotaur, killed instantly, fell slowly creating a mud wave that splashed Misty. The storm stopped with the beast's murder.

Tom looked at the murder weapon… An arrow? Still under the effect of Terra's gravity, he turned his head toward the cave's entrance. In the distance, Ryu appeared, an arm around Noemi's shoulder who was supporting him. He was skipping a bit, his bow in hand. Slowly, the pressure went down, allowing Nark and Asuka to sit back up. Obviously, the newcomers weren't affected by the artificial gravity.

"Ryu," called Asuka. "Where were you?"

Her brother ignored the question. Still supported by Noemi, he made his way to an horizontally cut rock. Tom studied the two kids: Ryu's left leg was broken, he had multiple cuts on his face, broken ribs and multiple bruises. Noemi looked about the same but had no broken bones.

She sat Ryu on the rock and asked him to wait. Her tone seemed more serious, mature maybe. Something that Tom wouldn't have thought possible due to her young age. She looked like a nurse.

"Are you alright?" she asked, making her way between Nark and Asuka.

Both of them nodded in silence. She then headed toward Tom and asked the same question. Seeing his positive answer, she resumed her tour without a smile. She made her way toward Misty whom she inspected quickly. Once he was finally able to move with his normal weight, Tom joined her.

"Misty, are you alright?" he asked.

She seemed to be slightly delirious. Noemi insisted that he'd step back. With her staff, she cast a few healing spells to make sure she'd survive. She was having a bit of a fever but according to Noemi's calculations it was pretty low. 38.5 degrees Celsius at most. Once Misty was back on her feet,

Noemi helped her walk to Terra.

“Did I pass?” she asked.

“Not really,” answered the god. “But nobody died, so I guess that you didn’t fail either. It’s not forbidden for a god to have a few guardians. Mana is proof of that, so consider yourself lucky that this human ensured your victory.”

“Thank you.”

The grateful feeling was directed toward Tom but Terra took it for himself. Time stopped for a fourth time. Inside Misty, her ghost exposed itself to become a bit more opaque. Chronexia returned in her right after. She had now accomplished fifty percent of her tasks. Only four seals were left. Temporal flux started again.

“Now go,” insisted Terra.

Without a word, Noemi handed Misty to Tom and went back to Ryu. They left the Earth temple and waited for each other at the exit. Noemi was rummaging in her pockets, searching for something.

“Where were you?” asked Tom.

“Quiet,” ordered Noemi.

From her pocket she grabbed a small bag filled with yellowish capsules. She gave one to everybody. Marle declined politely by waving her hand and Noemi didn’t insist, but she forced Tom, Nark, Asuka and Misty to take one.

“Swallow them, I made them myself” she said.

“What is it?” asked Tom while gobbling his.

Noemi waited for everybody in the group to swallow theirs before she answered.

“Vomiting pills,” she said with a compassionate tone.

“What?” asked Tom, startled. “I don’t think that this kind of medical practice is very legal…”

He suddenly heaved and a few seconds later, a brownish stream was

spurting out off his mouth.

"If you swallowed mud, you will be sick. You need to evacuate it," she explained. "Forgive me, I don't have the surgical table and the anesthetic to operate you according to the standards. That should be enough."

Decency made Misty try to refrain from vomiting, but the sound the others were making and the memories of her killing the lizard rushed back in her head. She only needed a few seconds to understand that she wouldn't be able to hold it back. She covered her mouth with her hand but the liquid didn't pay mind to her whims. Flowing between her fingers, she even felt a few tiny rocks, softened by her gastric acid, brush against her esophagus. This feeling only made her vomit more. She coughed like Tom.

"Alright," sighed Nark, tears in his eyes. "I… I think it's ov…"

He started again with renewed vigor. Tom leaned against the stone wall and had stopped trying to fight the pill. He was coughing and trying to catch his breath between each waves. Behind him, Asuka was crawling on the ground, curled in pain. Nark was mimicking her on all four and Misty was still standing but isolated herself from the group. Only Marle was looking at them with her eternal smile and Ryu was waiting a bit further away, leaning on another wall. Noemi was looking at her test subjects while searching for something in her bag.

Once the vomiting stopped, about 20 minutes later, she gave each of them a water bottle.

"Drink. You are very dehydrated, so drink everything."

Tom grabbed the bottle she threw at him and rinced his mouth with the first sip. He then emptied the bottle in one breathe. Once they all did what she asked, Noemi finally allowed herself to smile.

In the sky, the sun was slowly setting, forcing the group to set up a camp once again. They chose to walk north along the cave and in about 15 minutes, they reached a beach. Misty and Asuka who had partly vomitted on themselves jumped into the frozen ocean. They didn't care about the

temperature. The smell was infecting their clothes and skins. She had to get rid of it. This short freezing trip made Misty's fever subside almost right away.

Tom helped Nark and Marle build the camp. Meanwhile, Noemi was looking at Ryu's leg. The bone had just mended, he could walk tomorrow, but he'd have to be careful. She then inspected her patient's ribs. Once she removed his jacket, Tom glanced curiously at his muscles and found himself jealous. This kid was without a doubt more muscular than he was with his Ixcross.

"So, Tom, how are you doing?" asked Nark. "We didn't have a chance to talk in a while."

"I'm fine. What about you? You still haven't try your luck with her."

Nark shot a look at Misty in the ocean before staring at Tom.

"I'm waiting for the right moment. I'm a rather patient man."

"Then you'll have to wait for a bit longer, because Misty is mine," said Tom while crossing his arms behind his head.

With a mocking laugh, Tom headed toward the two girls who had been swimming for five minutes. He offered them towels and they all sat around the fire. Maybe this time they would get answers from Ryu and Noemi.

"Where were you?" asked Asuka.

"We stayed in a hotel in Arenight. Once we learned you had escaped, we followed you," answered Ryu.

"And your wounds?" asked Misty.

"Thanks to the riot, the guards thought we were together," lied Ryu.

"Lies," cut Tom. "I don't believe a word of that story."

Tom stared at Ryu with his most piercing look. A riot wouldn't have targeted two kids, even if they were with them. And every guards had left the city, either to run after them or Gab.

"I have nothing to prove to anybody," replied Ryu with the same cold

voice.

"You jerk!"

Tom jumped up and barreled toward him. Nark grabbed him by the shoulder and threw him back in the sand.

"Stop being so childish. He's just a kid and in no shape to receive a beating from you."

"Who are you calling a kid, buffoon? Just so we're clear, the only reason I'm with you is to get to Vince's castle and to get there I need Noemi who wants to be part of your group.

"We're leaving tomorrow," interject Misty. "Now that we found almost everybody, we only have to find the remaining seals and Vince. There is a port near the elves' village. We could ride a ship to Ricena, the continent. The Ice seal is there."

Nobody opposed her choice in destination. She chose to interpret everybody's silence as an agreement. Without missing a beat, she left to change her clothes. Asuka followed her and Marle gathered the dishes. Tom and Ryu stared at each other for a while, but Nark forced him to follow for a walk on the beach. He needed to simmer down.

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Twenty-four hours later, Gab was in front of the blacksmith. His training was over and so was the equipment he asked for. The tiny black man gave him a wrapped up sword that he scurried to study.

The blade was slightly curved and rather thick. It was the weight he asked for.

With his free hand, the blacksmith gave him a small round object attached to a chain. Gab thanked him and stored it in his red outfit.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. The shards of your previous sword are more than enough. It's a rare metal that will help me finish multiple projects."

Gab nodded and left the cave. It was nighttime. He walked on the

thin stone bridge lit by the magma and a red aura surrounded his body.

"A sharp blade and a controlled Fae. Now I can rival with Tom."

Gab bent his knees and in one jump he left the volcano, searching for the small group he had left. His lips were finely stretched into a satisfied smile.

Chapter 11:
Confession

"The 27th day of the 6th month of the year 881

I don't think I'm talented enough for this type of work, but I decided to continue a part of my dad's memoirs. I don't have much discipline in writing, but I felt like it. Since the 5th day of the 6th month, Vince started to kidnap the members of the elite. You probably don't know me, but I'm Achille's son, Tom. After their kidnapping, I began to search for them with my best friend, the girl I love the most in the world, Misty. The chances that you believe these lines are slim, even non-existent, but I'm doing it to kill time.

We have been waiting at Gardia's harbor for the past three days. The next departure for Ricena – our next destination – is only this afternoon. We are heading there because we believe we can find information regarding Vince. There's also the seal of ice that we hope to conquer for Misty."

"That's awful," complained Tom, tearing up the sheet of paper.

"What is?" asked a voice.

"Nothing, I tried to continue my dad's memoirs, but I'm not organized at all."

Tom turned around to look at who he was talking to and smiled. From his simple log cottage, Tom could see his interlocutor through the window.

"When did you get back?" asked Tom.

"Just now. You're rather easy to track."

Gab was standing in the window's frame, somewhat pretentious, as if he was bragging about his demonic abilities. Tom stood up and joined him outside.

"Are the others aware of your return?"

They started walking along the docks. Hundreds of wood cottages were built to serve as residences for travelers. Tom shared his with Nark, Misty, Marle and Noemi were together while Asuka and her brother shared another.

Nark had left with the goddess in training to refill their victuals, Noemi was still busy healing Ryu's injuries and his sister was spending time with the fusion.

"No, did I miss anything important?" replied Gab.

"We have completed the Darkness sanctuary and the Earth temple. Ryu brought Noemi back and the slave from the coliseum fused with the goddess of energy to create Marle. Oh, and we found Nark. The usual," joked Tom.

While walking with Gab, they stumbled upon the two young women. When she saw him, Asuka rushed to them. Marle smiled as usual and joined the two swordsmen. Asuka reached them, out of breath. Sweat soaked a few strands of hair on her forehead. She looked at Gab with admiration and she blushed lightly, no one noticed.

"You came back?" asked Asuka. "We were worried about you."

"I'm fine now. This kind of phenomenon will never happen again."

"What happened?" questioned Tom. "One moment, we were fighting and the next, you were this beast."

"Yes, when I don't have my sword in my hand, if my life is in danger or if I'm enraged, my animal side takes over."

Marle had approached Gab and was circling the half-demon while observing him. Her eyes stopped on the tail sticking out of his outfit at the base of his lower back. Without mischief, she grabbed it.

“H…Hey!” Gab cried out, surprised.

He turned around and ripped it off her hands.

“Don’t touch that,” he said, annoyed.

Far ahead, Tom saw Misty and Nark coming out of a shop, looking at them. Tom gave them a sign to come join them, but Nark apologized to Misty, pretending that he wanted to warn Noemi and Ryu about the departure of the ship in two hours.

Misty looked at the sky: it was light blue clear of any clouds. Birds were flying above some of the ships. She joined the group and listened to their conversation. Tom seemed slightly happier with Gab back in the team. This powerful mercenary was a good rival and someone he could seemingly trust. They saw each other as equals, they understood each other. Moreover, everyone Tom considered being part of their team was there. It was complete.

“The ship for Ricena will raise anchor soon,” announced a sailor.

“That’s our ride,” replied Tom with a wide smile. “Are you coming with us?”

“Of course, I still have to find Vince,” said Gab.

“I’ll go warn Nark, Noemi and Ryu about the schedule change,” announced Misty

“And I will take care of the missing boarding pass,” added Asuka with a wink.

Gab thanked her with a nod. Tom returned to his cottage, grabbed his belongings and Gab followed. Marle tagged along with her new companion and followed her to the ticket booth. Nark was probably upset about Gab, since they didn’t really get along, but Tom decided to not get involved. He didn’t want to sour his good mood. He took his bag, packed by Nark, and left for the ship.

“So, have you told her?” asked Gab to break the silence.

“I’m working on it,” admitted Tom. “Am I that transparent?”

“You know it’s only a waste of time to wait. Tell her and you'll know.

Otherwise, you'll only make the situation worse each time.”

“You're right… It’s settled, in Ricena I'll tell her. And for Asuka?”

“What about Asuka?” asked Gab

“Don’t you see she likes you?”

Gab looked at her in the distance, The conjurer was spying on him out of the corner of her eyes. She turned away when she realized he was watching her.

“How can she like me? She doesn’t even know me. If it's the case, I'll handle it in due time. If it happens, it happens, however she doesn't interest me. I'm a hunter and she's more of prey.”

“Really? Wouldn't that make her yours to get?” asked Tom intrigued.

Their conversation had lead them to the ship that would take them to Ricena. It was much more luxurious than the one Noemi sank with her Apocalypse. Tom still hoped to hear the truth about their getaway, but Noemi kept silent about it. Her only preoccupation was to heal Ryu. What could they have done?

Tom reached a plank that linked the ship to the pier and waited for the rest of the team. Asuka brought Gab’s boarding pass and Misty came back with the missing trio. When Nark arrived in front of Gab, he glared at him.

“Is there a problem?” asked Gab.

“… Might be,” cut Nark, annoyed.

He didn't say more and climbed on the ship. Tom followed him while shrugging. The others also climbed aboard and a few minutes later, the wooden plank was removed and thick acrid smoke was released by the chimney. Slowly, the ship made its way on the water.

Before they separated, the group gathered to the bow of the ship. Nark was keen on getting answers about Gab.

“Where were you?”

“Like I explained to the others, after I transformed in my demon form, I disappeared to get a new sword. When I have it, no matter the leve of

danger, I'll never transform. Without a weapon, my animal instinct takes over and I transform. There's a special seal imbued in the sword."

"Why was it this long?" insisted Nark.

"While my weapon was being crafted, I trained my Fae," explained Gab.

"Fae?" repeated Tom, suddenly interested. "I've been hearing about it for a while now, but no one ever explained what it was."

Ryu softly chuckled, still leaning on Noemi, he was holding his ribs to lessen the pain caused by the jolts. Realizing that Tom still ignored the concept, despite the questions on this subject in the DUELS, Misty explained it to him.

"Feeling producing assessable energy. I had never seen one in action before, but that's the grey aura that surrounded you in Edanqua."

"And how does it work?" he asked.

"Each aura is generated by an emotion," continued Gab. "The more you feel that emotion, the more it amplifies your physical abilities."

"And each color is related to a different emotion," finished Misty.

"So..." summarized Tom. "If I find which emotion makes me pulse, I will raise my power by feeling it?'

Gab nodded.

"Red means perseverance. It's up to you to discover what gray represent."

Tom nodded with excitement, forgetting for a second that he despised Ryu.

"What about blue?"

"That's none of your business," replied Ryu.

"*One day, I'll really kill him,*" promised Tom to himself.

Noemi forced Ryu to turn around and took him to his cabin. Tonight was the last day of treatment. For now, he had to rest. He could allow himself to do so since there was very little entertainment on this ship and the trip was

24 hours long.

The evening meal took place in the lower deck of the ship. Tom spent some time talking with Asuka and Gab, who was strangely more sociable toward him. In the evening, Tom tried to get closer to Misty, but she chose to spend some time alone in her room instead.

“Noemi seems different lately,” she said to herself.

In the corridor leading to her room, her own voice answered her without her consent.

“Would you like to see what happened to them during their absence?”

Understanding that it was her other half, she began the conversation, but only once she locked herself in her room. She didn’t want the others to think she was crazy because she was talking to herself.

“Is there a way?”

“Yes, there’s a skill that allows you to see events that happened, as well as those that are to come.”

“I'd like to see what happened with Noemi,” admitted Misty.

“Understood.”

A screen of white light blinded Misty. When she could see again, the whole ship had transformed into the edge of a forest. Ryu was walking with Noemi on his back. She was about to wake up. Misty assumed that the scene brought her back a few days ago, right after Ryu had left Arenight.

“Are you awake?” asked Ryu.

“Hum? Where are we, where are the others?” she panicked.

“We are south west of Arenight. After you were attacked, I healed you and we were teleported to this town. My sister and the others are still there and I borrowed you.”

“What for?” she asked.

Ryu hesitated a long time before answering. The words he was trying to say seemed difficult. Apparently, it was something he had never told

anyone before.

“I need your help.”

Without another word, he kept walking toward the forest. After a moment, he stopped and asked if she could walk. Seeing she could, he gently dropped her down. She sat on a rock while waiting for his explanation.

“Here it is,” he started. “In this forest, there's a dragon. I would like to capture it, but to do so, I need to kill it.”

“You’re going to attack a dragon!”

Seeing the surprise on her face, Ryu thought about his plan. Could she really be of any help? He had to believe it.

“Yes, but I simply won't get out of this fight unharmed. In Secretia, I realized you were a healer. First, I would like to apologize for my behavior when we first met. Second, I need you to assist me from a distance. I wouldn't want to die, you see?”

“I understand,” she replied. “But to heal you from a distance, I need to focus and I can’t move while I'm doing so. If I heal you, who will protect me?”

Once again, Ryu let a few seconds pass, but he stared directly in her eyes.

“I will protect you. I won’t force you to help me if you feel incapable of such a thing, but if you accept, there are two conditions you’ll have to respect.”

Noemi raised her eyes toward the sunset. She didn’t like the idea of killing a sacred beast, but she really wanted to save her parents and the others.

“It’s a deal, but I also have two conditions,” said Noemi. “Apparently you can only take on this dragon if I'm around, so I want us to return to the group once it’s all over and I also want you consider us as a duo. I'll be your combat partner, therefore you'll have to fully trust me.”

“Deal. On your end, you will have to remain quiet about the dragons,

therefore, not speak of this to anyone. And under no circumstance you will interfere in my fights other than healing me. I've heard about your apocalypse on the boat, I forbid you to use it since you can't control it."

Noemi nodded to seal the deal. She got up to follow Ryu, who walked between the trees. He stopped one last time before he entered the forest. He observed Noemi with his cold gaze.

"One last thing. We're no longer children. You're an intelligent girl, so I believe this concept is clear to you, but we could die at any moment, you can't retry if you make a mistake, therefore abandon your childish side and act like an adult as of now. You want me to protect you, so don't put yourself uselessly in danger."

The comment made Noemi's weak smile disappear. It was the first time someone spoke to her as an adult, that she was being treated like this. She had an overdeveloped intelligence, but Tom and Misty always spoke to her like she was a kid. She had seen people die because of her. She had also killed a few on that boat. Her role was to heal and protect. Without stress factor, Noemi was great, but as soon as she was part of the action, she'd lose her composure. She swore she would get better. This is why she wanted his help, to get better so that she would become one of the strongest people ever.

Noemi nodded and followed him in the forest. Slowly, the scenery in front of Misty became blurry with waves, then it brighten white and changed completely. She was now in the heart of the forest. Ryu had just started his fight. In the sky, a five meters tall and ten meters long lizard was flying at full speed.

Noemi took refuge between two trees. Ryu was running in the shadow of the dragon. They were in a glade and the color of the ground was dead gray. In the growing dusk, the dragon dove. Misty had her first sight of the beast. It was a brown lizard with a pointy head. Its body was covered in thick scales, impossible to pierce. Its short neck was linked to a body with thick paws. The dragon landed in front of Ryu. Noemi had followed him too

closely.

“Step back!” ordered Ryu.

The animal opened its maw and a powerful stream of sand got out of its jaw. Ryu glanced at the gust of wind coming toward him. He gritted his teeth and opened his arms to cover Noemi behind him. She covered her ears and closed her eyes. She was scared.

“What is this? I thought that dragons were only breathing fire?” she asked.

The attack stopped and once again, the dragon flew away.

Ryu fell, putting a knee to the ground to stop his fall. Noemi got up and kneeled in front of him. The sight was shocking. The jacket on top of his shirt was completely ripped off. His chest and face were raw, and covered in blood. The pressure of the wind had sanded his skin off. He panted, the pain must have been unbearable. The sand infected every cut.

“Those are elemental dragons and I want to collect them. This one is an earth dragon. So, will you heal me or not! Do your job and I'll protect you, that was our deal!”

Noemi was startled. She got up and focused. From the tip of her staff, a golden light appeared. After a few seconds, the light left her weapon and entered Ryu. The cuts closed themselves. The infections had been healed. Noemi’s eyes rolled. The healing spell she used made the blood to rush to her head.

Ryu immediately stood up and went back to fight. He took his metal bow crossed against his chest and grabbed an arrow from his quiver. He aimed far ahead and released the arrow. He had predicted the dragon’s trajectory by calculating its speed, the wind’s intensity, the pressure and all the trigonometry around the 200 meters between him and his target in less than four seconds.

Even Noemi hadn’t finished her mental calculations when he fired it. She concluded that it was because of his several years of experience. How

could such a young kid be so well trained?

The arrow hit the target, but bounced on its scales and fell on the ground. The dragon came back toward Ryu and Noemi.

“It doesn’t work,” noted Noemi.

“I realized that.”

The dragon landed in front of Ryu again and opened its maw for a second sand wave.

“You like the beach, right?” asked Ryu.

Ryu made a big gesture with his hands and presented his palms to the dragon.

“Πίδακα νερού!”

A water rocket left his hand and rushed into the dragon's maw.

“You know some elemental spells?”

The dragon shook its head and raised a paw to crush Ryu, who stepped back and grabbed Noemi behind her back and under her knees. He started running.

“All the elements and their shortcut.”

Noemi gasped, impressed.

“*Usually, to invoke elemental magic, you need to know and call out to a Greek relic. During this short time laps, the user must focus their physical energy in the element they want to invoke. The incantation is more like a recipe, but invoking the element without the relic requires several years of training*.” Noemi thought to herself.

“You’re a monster,” she whispered.

She had just realized his potential. Ryu put her down and turned toward the dragon. He grabbed a second arrow, placed it on his bow and aimed for a fraction of a second.

“They don’t work,” reminded him Noemi.

Ryu ignored her and prepared to release it.

“Τρύπησε, φωτεινό βέλος!”

The arrow shimmered. He released it and light trailed behind it. It pierced the dragon's shoulder. Blood gushed out of the deep cut. Noemi stood back up. The dragon charged at her. Ryu pushed her to the side. He was violently hit by the dragon's head. He bounced on a tree and crashed on the ground.

While getting up, Ryu analyzed his condition; he had broken ribs. The lizard was directly above him. It was rearing like a restive horse. It clawed at Ryu's shoulder and dislocated it, breaking his collar bone at the same time. The claws cut his newly healed chest.

"Argh!"

He was pressed against the tree.

"Apocal..."

"I said no!" yelled Ryu.

"I can't heal fast enough!" explained Noemi. "You'll die if I don't attack!"

"It isn't worth it... I won't die!"

A violent burst of blue light surrounded Ryu. He got up, faltering.

"Τείχος φωτιάς!"

A fire dome surrounded the blue screen and grew powerfully. The flames pushed the dragon away. When the blazes disappeared, Ryu wasn't there anymore. Noemi raised her eyes and saw him whirling above the dragon. Head toward the ground, bow in hand.

"Σκότος ... βέλος καταστροφέας!"

Ryu shot a black arrow at the dragon. It pierced the beast's head and finished its race in the ground.

"It's over," said Ryu, while landing.

The dragon fell, lifeless, only a wide hole pierced its skull. Ryu approached and recited a text in an Elfish language. The dragon turned into brown light and integrated the boy's body. Ryu collapsed. Noemi rushed to his side. She looked at him with empty eyes. She had witnessed another

murder.

Without a word, she helped him to get up by passing an arm around her shoulders. They shouldn't stay in the forest during the night. Especially half naked like that.

"Let's go back to the others, I'll heal you on the way."

The scenery disappeared and Misty woke up in her cabin. Immediately, there was a knock at the door. Misty got up and went to open it. On the other side was Tom. He was wearing thick padded clothes to protect him from the cold that prevailed on the ship.

"We are almost there," he said. "You slept all day. You should wear warm clothes, it's cold out there."

He waved at her and was about to leave to let her change.

"Yeah, okay, thanks… Tom?"

"Yes?" he asked, stopping in his tracks.

"No, never mind," she corrected.

Misty closed the door and was back alone with Chronexia once more.

"Happy of your vision?" asked Chronexia.

"No, I didn't need to get involved. I should apologize, but Ryu would surely accuse Noemi of revealing their deal to me. I'll pretend that nothing happened, but Ryu is really more powerful than I imagined."

Misty spent the next hour getting ready. As per Tom's warning, snow started falling on the ship, and slowly, a thin ice layer covered the ocean. The liner crushed the mini icebergs getting in its way and continued toward the port where it docked. The group gathered near the landing to evaluate their plan of action. Each of them were wearing a gigantic fur coat except for Gab and Marle. Both claimed not to be affected by thermal fluctuation.

"The city of Ricena is rather big, we'd better split up to pick up more information on Vince," explained Nark with a loud voice. "Let's regroup in the town's inn when we're done."

Around them, the wind was howling so loudly that they had trouble

hearing each other. They were a short way from the city. They hoped that once they'd enter the limits of Ricena, the wind would stop and that it wouldn't be as cold.

A few person around them were already headed toward the frozen city.

Tom was hesitating, it was too good of an opportunity. Suddenly, he wasn't too keen on being alone with Misty.

"Perfect, I need to have a chat with you bro." cut Asuka.

She took him by the arm and forcefully dragged him to the city. Noemi followed them. She had barely finished his treatments and if Asuka mistreated him too much, she might need to start all over again. Marle started to frolic in the snow, it was her first time seeing this white layer. The gesture was innocent. Since she couldn't speak Tom knew it was better not to expect any news of Vince from her.

"You and me," told Gab to Nark. "There's something I would like to settle."

Gab drew his sword and pointed it at Nark.

"Bring it on, I'll take pleasure in ripping your tail off," replied Nark.

"Try not to really kill yourselves, ok?" yelled Tom seeing them walking away.

"Oh well, there's only us now," smiled Misty. "Do you have an idea where to start?"

Tom blushed, he looked at the city in the distance. Ricena was built on the flank of a mountain. At the top was a cathedral and below were a few bars and taverns mixed with restaurants. At its base were simple residences.

"You want to visit the cathedral first?" asked Tom politely.

"Sure," she replied.

Without waiting any longer, she dragged him inside the limits of Ricena. Their feet sunk a few centimeters in the snow until they reached the paved street. Some people were shoveling their entrance to clear up the way,

but Tom ignored them. For the first time in a while, his heart was pounding in his chest because of Misty's presence. How would he be able to confess his love, after such a long time hiding it?

But he had promised so he was dead set on it. For him, as well as Misty. He could already see themselves together, fight against Vince and annihilate him together. He giggled at this mental image. He didn't see the seconds pass because of his pressing revelation. Everything would go like a charm, why would she refuse? She had no reason not to appreciate him after they spent more than 10 years together.

Tom and Misty climbed the stairs. Misty stopped in front of the inhabitants to question them about Vince, but none had any information about him. No one ever heard of him in this region for an eternity. Tom stayed in the stairs leading to the church and kept the short movie in his head rolling. The more he climbed, the more confident he became.

Gab was right. He was charming, his intelligence was arguable, but he was courageous and could protect her. She surely loved him!

When they reached the peak, Misty went to interrogate its inhabitants, while Tom waited for her outside. When she came out, she worried about him.

"Are you alright? You seem thoughtful."

In a second, his confidence dropped drastically.

"Yes, uh, can I talk to you? Please…"

"Of course," she said, intrigued.

She approached him and Tom turned toward the ramp that prevented people from sliding from the peak of the mountains to the residences. Around them, snow kept on falling, but the temperature was mild. The wind was stopped by the mountain. In the distance, they could see people shovel or walk.

"What is it?" she asked.

Tom swallowed with difficulty. He had butterflies in his stomach and

he was crimson red. Misty wondered if he needed a break after climbing those stairs, but she couldn't have been more wrong.

"You know," he said after a while, "since the first day we met, it never occurred to me that one day we would be in this kind of situation. Even if it's a horrible one, I am happy because I get to spend time with you and the others."

Misty listened to him, she couldn't really see where he was going with this.

"Day after day I trained you, but it was only an excuse to spend more time with you. I got to know you, appreciate you. And what I'm trying to say is... it's difficult," he sighed.

He looked at her in the eyes. Her emerald eyes broke his heart. He loved her so much. For an instant, he forgot everything. His parents, Ryu, Vince and all consequent problems. Only Misty mattered right now. He approached his face to Misty's.

Instinctively, Misty imitated him and she closed her eyes by reflex.

Tom approached his lips to Misty's and with a last ripped heartbeat, he kissed her. He pressed his lips against hers. The result didn't really matter, he had the impression that time had stopped. Had Misty really cut the flow? He ignored it, but would make the most of it. Seeing that he couldn't insist any further, he stepped back. Misty moved forward a few centimeters so that the kiss would last a second more.

"Since the first day i met you. I am in love with you, Misty. You are the person that matters the most to me. And no matter what happens, I always promised I would give my life for you and to protect you with my heart and soul from everything that can reach and hurt you. Without exception, you can always count on me. I will be your guardian, your hero, forever."

Tom opened his eyes. Around Misty throbbed a powerful pink Fae. Was she upset by his gesture? Her eyes were filled with tears. Was she angry

that he stole her first kiss?

Her pink Fae vanished in an instant, her trembling tone stopped and she had taken back her usual voice. She stopped crying.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I don’t love you.”

Chapter 12:
Role Playing Game

Tom felt like he hit a mirror headfirst. She didn't love him? But... but... Where did he went wrong? No, she had to love him!

Tears welled up in his eyes, he couldn't control it. No! NO! Why? He was so sure she felt the same... She was lying, it was a lie!

"I do not love you," repeated Misty.

Tom's tears started to flow. His voice was shaking even if he didn't utter a word. His throat was twitching. He had to go.

He turned around and ran away. Behind him, shiny snowflakes fell into the stockpiled snow.

Misty buried her face in her hands and fell on her knees in the snow.

"NO! What did you do!" she yelled.

"Oh come on, don't tell me you care for that spoiled brat," answered her own voice.

"Yes! I'm in love with him," she cried.

"Do I need to remind you wo you are?" answered Chronexia. "You are a goddess. Immortal. What will happen when you reach a 100 years old? He'll die. Do you really want to build a stupid relationship like that? As soon as you accepted the goddess in training status you had to make sacrifices. Moreover, this kid will never achieve anything in life. I give him a few more days to live. Nothing more."

"No... Tom... I love you..."

***

Ryu and Asuka entered a tavern. The place was rather empty: apart from the bartender, only one man was sitting on a stool. He was drinking

beer from a tankard, but he ignored them. Ryu and Asuka sat at a table.

"I'd like you to explain what happened recently," asked Asuka.

"It's none of your business," answered her brother.

She sighed. Her brother was never the type to confide in her and it hurt her. She wanted to be there for him, to be a big sister, but he never opened to her.

"At least help me find some information on Vince."

"I already know everything I need about him," said Ryu.

The man on the stool smashed his tankard. The beer splattered on the floor. He approached Ryu and lifted him by the collar. Ryu didn't fight back.

"What do you know about Vince?" asked the man.

"Why should I tell you?"

Ryu looked at him in the eyes. It was obvious that he wasn't shaken by the man's aggressiveness.

"I am Sentron, one of the master's generals, like Vince."

"You should let go of him. It took me a while to stitch him up."

Noemi entered the bar through the revolving doors.

"Your girlfriend is gonna save you?" taunted Sentron.

From nowhere, Noemi made her staff appear. Its wooden material had been replaced with titanium. Noemi made it spin and quickly hit Sentron on the inside of his elbow. With the rebound, she then hit the general's fingers who let go of Ryu who landed on his feet and headed toward the bartender to pay him for the damages to come.

Noemi placed her right hand in front of the man's torso and a golden light started to swell. It exploded, and propelled Sentron against the wooden wall which he smashed. She followed him and looked while he rolled in the snow. Once he got back up, the teenager started to spin her weapon to show off her dexterity. She ended her move by putting her staff extended behind her back.

Sentron got back up and two blades popped out of the bracelets he was wearing on his wrists. He ran toward Noemi and tried to impale her, but she parried each of his blows with her weapon.

Ryu exited through the hole and Asuka, somewhat panicking, watched. She wanted to help her friend but, surprisingly, she was dealing with the situation with ease. Asuka still tried to intervene but Ryu held her back. He shook his head.

With his blades, Sentron scratched Noemi's face a few times.

From the corner of her eye, Noemi glimpsed at a shiny dot. She jumped backward to avoid an incoming explosion. Blown away by it, she slid a bit down the slope before stopping, her silver hair freed by a gust of wind. From one of the houses roof, the intruder teleported next to Sentron and stepped in front of him.

Noemi studied him: he was horrible. He was barely one meter tall, his yellow teeth were rotting away and his clothes were in rags. He was stifling a petty laugh. Noemi would probably have mistaken him for a 10 years old brat if it wasn't for his hair entirely made of flames.

He looked at the half-elf with a hungry and interested expression. He was licking his cavities riddled teeth like he could taste the tartar on them.

"Who are you?" asked Noemi.

"Denver. He's a general like me," explained Sentron.

An arrow flew two centimeters away from Noemi's ear. It was about to impale the brat's head but his fire mane turned it to ashes before it could reach him.

Ryu stepped toward Denver who was still chuckling. The kid disappeared and materialized in front of the archer. With a powerful punch, he lifted Ryu off the ground. He then span on himself and once Ryu was back at his level, he kicked him. Ryu flew away and crashed on the frozen stone alleyway.

"Ryu!" worried the two girls.

He stopped in a snow bank, face against the ground. He stood back up with a punch against the ground. He was shining with a blue aura.

“Don’t use it now!” ordered Noemi.

“I’m not thinking about him,” said Ryu, wiping some blood from the corner of his mouth. “Gaia!”

A gigantic monster exited Ryu’s body. Its shape was phantasmagorical. The beast slowly became more opaque while it was still swelling. When it stopped, it was more than 30 meters high. It was a gigantic golem made of purple tinted gray rocks. It had cracks along its scales.

Gaia smashed its palm where the brat and Sentron stood. The two generals jumped backward to avoid being flattened.

“Alright, that’s enough,” said Sentron to Denver. “Let’s head back.”

The small man sent a few pervert kisses toward Noemi, then they both disappeared. Out of control, Gaia roared and started to destroy the nearby homes.

“Call it back, Ryu!” yelled Noemi to cover the deafening noise.

“I can’t” replied Ryu gritting his teeth. “Once summoned, gods only disappear when they want.”

“Should we evacuate the town?” she asked.

“Gaia isn’t about to disappear, so that would be the best thing to do.”

Ryu fell on his knees. He couldn’t see anything. Blood had rushed to his head. It was too soon to resume the fighting but he had another dragon to capture on this continent. Noemi crouched next to him.

“I’m scared,” she confessed.

She may act like a strong woman, but she was still just a kid. Ryu grew up with that adult mindset but she didn’t.

“Marle!” called Asuka.

Asuka looked at Gaia ruining the town, one house after the other. Behind her, the blond arrived with her gigantic mace.

“Can you throw me?” asked Asuka.

As an answer, the fusion gave her her eternal smile. She closed her eyes and tilted her head to the side for a few seconds. Marle twirled, dragging her mace on the ground. Her rotation speed created a two meter radius of snow. With her exaggerated strength, she lifted her weapon and dug it into the stone ground in one hit, leaving the flat side on the surface. Marle politely bowed and presented her mace. Asuka stepped on it.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked Ryu. “You cannot defeat Gaia. It’s a god!”

“Trust me,” she replied. “You have to think out of the box sometimes… Go!”

Marle grabbed her weapon’s handle and lunged it forward. Asuka added a jump to her propulsion and rushed toward the giant.

“Don't look down, don't look at all. It’s my chance to prove how good I can be. It has to work.”

Asuka grabbed one of her many cards from her pocket. Unlike all the other, the one she was holding between her fingers was completely white. With her boost, Asuka landed on Gaia’s shoulder. Without missing a beat, she threw the card against the golem’s head. The paper scrap stuck against the stone. Asuka lifted two fingers in front of her face and recited:

“I am Asuka Starz and I specialize in invocations. From now on, the god Gaia is mine. It will answer to my name and my commands.”

An icy drought got sucked into the card. Gaia slowly lost its opacity and entered the card. Asuka fell toward the ground. She was terrified.

“Aaah!”

With a powerful jump, Marle reached Asuka and grabbed her beneath her knees and back. They gained a bit more height then landed with force. To protect her from her fall, Marle had squished Asuka’s head between her breasts. When she dropped her off, Asuka was still embarrassed by that. She politely thanked her and took back her card. Noemi and Ryu approached.

“You captured it?” he asked.

“That’s my thing,” she explained. “God or not, I can create a contract that allows me to take over anything.”

“It seems a bit easy to capture a god,” he replied.

“Yes. Well this is only a temporary contract in order to restrain it right away. Tonight, I'll have to create one more complex. This one will only last for a few hours.”

“Whatever,” cut Ryu. “You got rid of it and it’s all that matters.”

Asuka held back a disappointed frown. Marle placed a hand on her shoulder and pointed toward the inn where they would spend the night. If they stayed there, they would obviously be accused of vandalism so they had to disappear as soon as possible.

***

Outside of town, the wind had stopped blowing. Nark and Gab faced each other. On one side, Nark seemed exhausted but there were no cuts on his face or clothes that indicated that one of Gab’s attack had been successful. On the other side, the half-demon was bleeding from different places and had a few broken ribs.

“You are so predictable,” said Nark. “How do you intend on winning when all you do is attack? You think you’re getting better? You’ve capped buddy. You do not know what real power is.”

From his gloved hand, a gigantic orange sphere started to grow.

“I hate you,” followed Nark. “Everybody admire you because you're strong and straightforward,” he gave Gab a dirty look and the sphere’s size tripled. “But in reality, you’re rather plain. Me on the other hand, I am a first tier strategist.”

The perseverance Fae surrounded Gab’s body who had still not said a thing.

“You’re using pretty lights. If only they would do more than dazzle,” taunted Gab.

“Don’t be so pretentious!”

Nark threw his artificial sun at him. With no hesitation, Gab ran sword first into it. He sliced it from the bottom to the top and the ball deflected in the sky. But Nark was already in front of him and quickly punched Gab in the abdomen. He then lifted his elbow and hit him under the chin. Gab stepped back and struck his sword at Nark who locked it by hitting his knee on his forearm. Once his foot touched the ground, Nark spun and hit Gab's sternum with his other leg. The hit sent Gab flying in the snow.

"It's over," said Nark while turning around.

In the sky, the gigantic sphere turned into multiple smaller ones that rushed at Gab, laying in the snow. They exploded on contact. To protect himself, Gab had placed his sword in front of his face. Nark let him suffer in peace and headed back to Ricena. Gab started to laugh. Silently at first then louder and louder.

"Really? Is that all he got? He barely reaches forty thousand manas and he thinks he's that powerful? It's almost sad, but that crosses him off my list. Only Ryu could be a problem."

Laying in the snow, Gab looked at his hand. With disdain, he got back up and dusted his clothes. Maybe Nark had hurt him, but it wasn't like he was fighting with all his might himself. He stepped forward and fell in the snow.

"Haha! Even if I let him win, he manhandled me more than I thought he would. I think I'll take a small break…"

***

When Gab woke up, it was dark. He stood up and headed toward the town. He shouldn't wait to be frozen solid. What time was it? One in the morning, two maybe?

At the entrance, he turned left toward the inn. He could distinguish two figures coming out of it. He headed their way and they didn't avoid him.

"Where do you think you're going at that time of the night?" asked Gab.

“That’s none of your business,” answered Ryu.

“Maybe but that doesn’t mean that I will let you through. And causing a commotion at that time of the night will not help your getaway.”

“What makes you think that we are trying to flee? It’s only a matter of time. We’re leaving ahead of you in order to make a detour,” replied the archer. “And you don’t seem to be in a state where you could measure to us both.”

Gab disappeared and reappeared behind Noemi. He grabbed her by the collar and lifted her without hurting her. He threw her in front of him and she staggered a bit before finding her footing again.

“Enough to make you go back inside if I really want to. I will let you go if you heal me and if you get to the Ice catacombs tomorrow at three. Misty will need all the help she can get.”

Ryu nodded. He looked at Noemi who mimicked him. She headed toward Gab and healed his wounds with one or two strikes of her staff. Once done, she and Ryu scurried outside of town.

Tom came down the main staircase. He looked terrible. With each steps, he stopped to look at his feet sink in the snow. Without realizing it, he joined Gab in order to get inside the inn.

“Are you alright?” asked Gab.

“She… said no.”

Tom lifted his head and looked at Gab. His eyes were puffy from all the crying and the icy wind.

“Oh,” hesitated Gab. “Well, it’s not that bad. There are plenty of other girls…”

“Ah,” smiled Tom.

He looked at the starry night. A few seconds went by before his tears started to flow again.

“I don’t want another. All my life she’s been my inspiration, my reason to live, to carry on. I want to become the best swordsman in the world.

Not to be better than everybody but to be her guardian and protect her. She's not the strongest but she's gutsy and passionate. I wake up in the morning and work really hard to appear courageous, to impress her and to make her fall in love with me. I know I'm not the smartest in the world, but… she's my world."

"What do you intend to do then?" asked Gab.

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Tom nostalgically. "What can I do? Even if she doesn't love me, I can't control my feelings. I'll continue to love her and protect her no matter what. I wished so hard that she would love me back, but she doesn't need to. I won't give up on my love for her."

"Go to bed," said Gab with a friendly tone. "If you want to protect her tomorrow during the trial, you'll need some rest."

Tom sighed deeply and agreed begrudgingly. They entered the inn and went to their room for the night. Tom only slept a little and, a floor above, so did Misty.

Tom woke up at the 10th hour of the 29th day. He had finally fallen asleep at dawn. Nark had knocked on his door to wake him up. He had slept for three hours only, but he felt ready to run a marathon. He entered the main room were four of them were having breakfast in peace. Only Misty was missing. Tom joined them but the atmosphere was gloomy. Asuka was grumbling about her brother's nocturnal departure, Gab made fun of Nark about his wounds that miraculously healed overnight and Marle was playing with some potatoes and forks that she moved around like feet.

Misty went down the stairs that led to the common room. She was talking to herself.

"You're really starting to piss me off Chronexia. Even if you're my other half, you cannot decide for me. Tom's my friend so if I decide to lose my night so that he can feel better, it's my choice."

"I'm sorry," she replied. "It's just that I don't want you to get hurt."

"Yeah because it would affect you too. Don't be selfish, I'm still the

one in charge."

Misty arrived at the table and sat in front of Tom. He didn't look at her. If he did, he would start crying again. Asuka looked at them, one after the other. Gab had explained the situation but it was wise not to bring up the subject.

"If we leave early and travel fast, we could get to the Ice catacombs in the afternoon," said Nark. "Is it okay for you Tom?"

Tom gave him a dirty look, like he had Vince in front of him.

"Who made me the leader? Nobody. The trials are Misty's responsibilities. If there is a problem, she's the one you have to consult with."

Tom stood up, threw his napkin on the table and left to his room.

"I'll wait for you at the entrance. Take your time," he added.

"Did we refill our food and water supplies?" asked Gab to Asuka. She nodded, puzzled.

"Yes, Marle and I did it this morning."

"Good. In that case we'll leave as soon as everybody is done eating," he concluded.

To hurry up, Marle loaded her two potatoes in her mouth at the same time, making her look like a squirrel. She nodded multiple times rapidly and downed a glass of water to help her swallow.

Gab stood up and caught up with Tom who had gotten his backpack from his room and had made his way to the entrance. Nark finished his plate and paid for the whole group. He left a few gold pieces on the table and put on the backpack next to his chair.

"You don't want to eat?" asked Asuka to Misty.

She frowned. She wasn't really hungry. She forced a pancake in her mouth and almost heaved. Asuka stood up and Marle followed her. Misty downed an orange juice glass and went after them. That would be enough for now.

At the entrance, Tom was wearing a fur coat and some thick boots.

He was wearing gray goggles on his head to shield his eyes from the relentless wind of the icy plains. Misty really liked his style.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes," she conceded.

Misty put on an outfit similar to his, only her glasses were pink instead of gray. Asuka had chosen a pair for everybody. Once the whole group was finally ready, they left the inn.

***

A few kilometers away, Ryu just collapsed next to a blue dragon. The monster was about 15 meters long. The beast was dead, riddled by electric arrows, but Ryu was nearly in the same state: he had lost his left arm. It had been frozen and the beast shattered it with its tail. His right leg was also covered in dangerous frost. With his remaining arm, he focused and made hot water flow on his leg to make it melt. Noemi ran to him.

"Are you alright?" he asked her.

"Don't worry about me, you're missing an arm," she panicked.

"You think you could heal that?" he joked.

Her healing powers were very strong, but to regrow an arm was impossible. Ryu knew that. Arms didn't grew back when they're cut down.

Noemi bit her lower lip. She looked around her, searching for a solution.

"Any other wounds?" she asked gloomily.

"No it's alright," he answered with a smile. "A few frostbite here and there, but nothing major."

He was smiling? Why? Ryu never smiled to anybody. Noemi had been a precious help during this fight. Between the two dragons, she started to read a book containing some powerful support spells. She had created some enormous force fields to prevent Ryu from being instantly crystallized. She had turn his wooden arrows to metal while they were flying and, to top it all, she closed his wounds as soon as they opened. Only once the dragon had

breached her defense and it cost him his arm. But he wasn't mad at her. After all, he was still alive.

"In that case," started Noemi.

She teared fabric from her own sleeve and changed it to leather. She handed it to him and instructed him to bite it.

"What are you doing?"

"It's called cheating. If there is one thing Tom taught me, it's that even if there are some established rules, we don't have to follow them. When you're losing blood, I renew it with my magic. I duplicate the cells and it fills what you're missing. Since every blood cell has mostly the same nature, its not too hard to achieve. It's like I'm cloning your blood. If I can do it with those cells, why couldn't I do it with others? According to my advanced surgery book, it's not impossible."

"Will I end up with two right arms?"

"Maybe. Two right arms is better than only one, right? I'll still try to aim for symmetry. The thing is, it'll be painful."

"Do what you have to. I'll put up with it."

"Also, try not to move too much. For this kind of procedure I would usually make you sleep, but here you'd be in danger of hypothermia and it could kill you."

"Don't move, and stay awake. Got it."

Noemi nodded and pointed her staff at Ryu's right arm. He let her work in silence. He bit the leather and waited.

Noemi had closed her eyes in order to focus. She could feel the plasma from his right arm. The energy flowed in every cells. She saw their nature. It was easy but it would take time. She started by his shoulder bone that she duplicated.

Ryu felt some discomfort in his right arm, but nothing that would make him scream in pain. He looked at her. Since he couldn't sleep, he had to turn his attention to something. He would get his dragon once she was done

but looking at her work was somewhat enchanting.

Noemi placed her hand on Ryu's stump and his bone started to grow back.

Still biting the leather strip, he grunted in pain. He felt like if his arm was being torn again. He looked. His ivory shoulder bone was growing slowly, at the same speed as Noemi's descending hand. After an hour of torture interrupted by blood refills, Noemi finished his bone structure. Ryu was impressed. She really had created a symmetry of his right arm. Obviously, since all the main ligaments were missing, he couldn't move it, but everything was holding in place. Noemi was sweating profusely. Her throat was dry and her breath short but she didn't stop.

"I'll give you your arm back," she puffed. "It's my fault if you lost it."

Around her, a green aura started to appear. The bigger it grew, the faster the procedure went. She finished the ligaments, the veins and rebuilt his arm's nervous system. Now, only the flesh and skin were missing. The part that should probably have taken the longest only lasted 20 minutes thanks to Noemi's tenacity. Her aura had reached fifty thousand manas. Ryu didn't know how, but he was impressed. She had more potential than he ever thought.

"Only the nails…"

She wanted his arm to look identical to the one he had before the accident. It was proud and perfectionist from her, but she had to. Only his annular and pinky left. Noemi collapsed on Ryu. Her Fae faded in a second. Ryu caught her before her head hit the ground. She had passed out. He stood up and carried her with him.

"Of all the persons living on this planet, Noemi Watson, you are the only one who won my respect."

***

Tom lowered his cowl and raised his goggles on his head. His companions did the same when they joined him. They had finally reached the

Ice catacombs. The name was maybe a bit exaggerated, it was a giant cave with a black and white checked pattern marble floor. The place looked like a giant chessboard.

Misty removed her coat and left it by the entrance. The temperature was mild and this clothes would be too cumbersome. The others piled theirs on top of hers. They had removed all of their winter equipment. Only Tom kept his goggles on his head to keep his hair out of his forehead. He leaned on one of the cave's walls and Misty went toward the center. There, a young woman appeared, floating.

She was wearing a hat with two long tips: one blue and one purple. Her face was covered with white make-up on which a tear had been drawn. Her black and white outfit was checkered with lozenges.

She bowed humbly and introduced herself. Behind the group, Marle solemnly put one knee on the floor as a sign of respect.

"Good evening, my name is Frost and this is my domain."

"I am Misty, a goddess in training. I'm here to complete your trial."

Frost clapped her hand multiple times, excited.

"Oh excellent!" she rejoiced. "It's been a long time since I had someone to entertain me. My trial is a role playing game. You take the appearance of someone and you have to fight against six enemies. The fighters only attack during their turns and are powerless once it's their opponents' turn. You'll need to use a lot of strategy…"

"Sorry I'm late."

The group turned toward the entrance where Ryu was standing with an unconscious Noemi in his arms. He moved forward to join Gab and Tom.

"I had a bigger setback than I thought, but we're here now."

Gab nodded and squinted his eyes. He found Noemi's state suspicious but didn't comment on it.

"Can I continue my explanations?" cut Frost. "Like I said, there are six fighters. So two of you will simply watch. I only have five puppets so I

can't imbalance the teams. I will have the pleasure of choosing your teammates. It's my trial after all. Of course, the trainee has to be part of it as the queen. If your queen is vanquished, the game is over."

"So I have to survive," summarized Misty.

Frost nodded with a toothy smile.

"Even if it's just a game, I strongly doubt that you want to lose even one piece. Unless you judge you friends worthy to be sacrificed," continued Frost. "Your team will be composed of the small black haired boy and the unconscious girl in his arms. Add the other black haired girl. "

It was obvious that Frost was only interested in those that were in the worst shape and those who seemed less menacing. A very strategic choice, deduced Misty, but it was seriously playing against her. Especially with Noemi's state.

"Is that okay so far?" asked Frost, seeing Misty's expression of protest.

It was obviously a trap. If Misty refused she would lose right away and she couldn't make a tired Ryu and an unconscious Noemi face this risk.

"We're okay," cut Ryu and Asuka.

"What?" asked Misty, surprised. "What about Noemi?"

"I'll take care of her," answered Ryu.

Misty hesitated but agreed. Now there were only two more persons to add to the team. Nark was a great strategist but he couldn't take her place as the queen. Marle would be great too but Terra had said that gods were powerless in domains other that theirs.

And there was Gab and Tom. Gab was a prime choice. He had excelled in the water trial, even if it was only for a few seconds. Misty hoped Frost would choose him. But Tom? Could she ask so much of him after breaking his heart?

"This man," added Frost, pointing at Gab. "And finally…"

Tom smiled. He walked toward Frost and unsheathed his hazblades.

"Me."

"Yes, why not," said Frost intrigued. "In front of you, multiple abilities will scroll virtually. You can choose one. During the game, you can only use it once so make sure to think about your actions."

"No," protested Misty. "Choose Nark or Marle…"

"Misty, it's alright," cut Tom.

In front of Misty and each of the challengers, a transparent orange list appeared and scrolled upward. On it there were dozens of squares filled with symbols and text explaining the abilities. It was very varied: stronger attack for three turns, shield for one turn, attack any square, etc. Each ability had it's name in tagged over it. They'd probably need to call it out to activate it.

Misty chose the one that allowed her to kill in one strike. It could be useful, right? Once everybody had chosen their own, Frost lifted her arms toward the cave's ceiling. Each team members was blinded by a powerful light. Once they regained their sight, they were all dressed differently. Tom was wearing a squire's leather armor and Gab a knight's metal one. It was simple but fitted their style. Asuka was wearing a witch's long black dress and Ryu a page's short beige toga. Noemi was covered with a white sheet and wings were adorning the ribbon in her hair. She looked like an angel.

Tom looked at Misty. She was ravishing. She was wearing a long blue, pink and white lace dress. Her hair was down and reached the middle of her back. The outfit had lengthened them.

Tom was speechless and his heart skipped a beat again when he remembered that he had confessed his love to her the day before. How could she think he'd be mad at her? Everything was his fault. He had told her and it damaged their friendship. He should have kept it for himself instead, but what's done was done. He had to face the consequences and…

A burst of laughter brought him back to reality. He turned around and saw Gab on the ground, laughing and crying from it.

“Are you alright?” asked Tom reluctantly.

“Ha, ha, hahahahaha!”

Unable to answer, he pointed at Marle and Nark in the background. Both of them were also wearing costumes like the rest of the team. Marle looked like a copy of Frost, wearing a hat with two tips hanging down to her buttocks. Only the colors had been inverted. It wasn’t funny but Narks costume was another story.

He was wearing a long blonde wig, high heels, make-up and a pink bloomer dress. Nark seemed… upset. Tom guffawed. Nark was ridiculous and Gab’s laugh was contagious. Tom chuckled.

“Now you’re really a princess,” said Gab between two fits of laughter. “Oh! My ribs hurt.”

Tom laughed while Nark grunted.

“Now that everybody is wearing their costume, let’s begin,” cut Frost.

The team was teleported on different squares of the chessboard. Next to Frost, different figures appeared. Two mages, two warriors and an archer.

“You have three actions per turn. You can exchange moves for attacks and vice versa. You also have three health points. Archers can attack any square in a straight line for one health point and mages can reach as far as two squares around them. You get the first turn.”

Frost smiled but Misty was expecting it.

“Thanks but I’m a defensive chess player. My pieces won’t move for this turn.”

Ryu smiled but Frost lost hers.

She moved her pieces first, getting them closer to Gab and Tom. For her turn Misty made her warriors go forward and moved Ryu two squares. Still with her turn, she made Ryu shoot an arrow at one of the wizard, removing one of its health point. The distance between him and Ryu would prevent him from retaliating next turn.

Next, Frost's wizard closed on Ryu and with his last move attacked him, removing his first imaginary heart.

"Are you alright?" worried Misty.

"Don't worry, I still have two and it's more than enough. Next turn this piece will be eliminated. Get Asuka to step back two squares and one right."

"But she could kill a warrior in two turn, no?"

"It's your trial, you do as you please," cut Ryu.

Misty bit her thumb. Did Ryu saw an opening? Should she take the risk to listen to him? But if Misty wanted to play defensively, she had to call her pieces back near her. So that's what she instructed Asuka to do. Without any strategic knowledge, she obeyed. She was trusting Misty after all.

In two turns, Gab and Tom got hit by three arrows from Frost's archer. Gab two and Tom one. Ryu eliminated Frost's first piece: the wizard. He couldn't approach more before dying and had only removed on of Ryu's heart. Since Noemi was unconscious, she couldn't attack and to protect her Misty kept her next to her at the back. Following Ryu's instructions, Misty moved Asuka on the chessboard. Until one of Ryu's command seemed suicidal.

"Why leave her there?" asked Misty. "She only has one heart."

This time Ryu spoke to Asuka.

"Trust me, she won't attack you."

He stared at her with conviction. He was so sure that she believed him. Despite Misty's and Gab's disapproval, Asuka moved to the square indicated by Ryu. On his turn, Ryu stepped back to study the board. Then Gab eliminated the ice goddess' archer and finished his turn with one spare action. Unlike what Ryu thought, Frost moved one of her warriors two cases right in front of Asuka. He also only had one heart left but he could attack.

He wouldn't attack, right? Asuka didn't want to die. She had trusted her brother. Tears welled up in her eyes. In front of her, the puppet's

determination was merciless.

"Ryu!" said Asuka, shaking.

"Oh! It seems like I was wrong," said Ryu, deceptively dazed.

"RYU!" cried Asuka.

The warrior lowered his axe, Asuka instinctively closed her eyes.

"Ability *exchange*!" called a voice.

Asuka's body became white and disappeared from the square. A second later, Gab replaced her and Asuka stood where Gab was standing before. They had switched places.

"Girls shouldn't be so gullible," said Gab.

The ax fell on him and cut his torso. He fell on the floor and disappeared into light particles like if his body was made of firefly that just took flight.

"No!" cried Asuka.

This time she was left alone on her square, far from the rest of the team. She wanted to run to her previous square but since her turn had been switched with Gab, an invisible force held her back.

"Gab!" yelled Tom.

"He's dead," replied Frost. "I warned you that losses were dangerous."

"In a game of chess, you have to sacrifice pawns" added Ryu. "Ability *Diagonal line*."

He placed an arrow on his bow and aimed at two o'clock. Following the diagonal, it pointed at the warrior that had just killed Gab and the wizard further in the back.

"What!" exclaimed Frost.

Ryu released his arrow and it went through the two pieces. Both of them only had one heart left and were eliminated. Frost only had a warrior left with all its hearts and herself. On Misty's side, Ryu still had two hearts, but after eliminating the two pieces he was too far and badly aligned to be of

any use for the remaining of the game.

Same thing for Asuka who had exchanged her spot with Gab and was now alone in her section. The game would be over before she could come back. Her ability was to add an attack at the end of her three turns and from where she was it was useless.

Gab was dead and Noemi wasn't of any help. To protect her Misty had stayed next to her since the beginning of the game and hadn't moved since. Tom was located two squares behind Frost and her warrior. In conclusion, he couldn't come back in time to attack either of them.

Misty analyzed the upcoming turns. Frost would arrive in front of her with one action left to attack and her warrior would take her two remaining hearts before her turn. Did she lost? Yes. In the background, Nark was quickly rubbing his blonde head like he just drew to the same conclusion. It was over, she would lose.

The warrior moved up one square and arrived at Misty's right side. He took two of her hearts. Frost moved up two squared and positioned herself in front of Misty.

"If the queen is vanquished, the game is over. Even if it's five against two, if I eliminate you, I win. Attack," she called.

Misty got scared. She didn't want to lose. Gab was dead because of her and now it was her turn? She didn't want to die, she was so scared.

"T…TOM!"

A grey flash of light lit the room. Once it dissipated, Tom was next to Misty and Frost who had just claimed her attack.

"How," she stammered.

"Ability *brave soldier,*" replied Tom, standing between them. "I share the queen's square and take the blow for her. She wins."

"Tsk, brazen."

Tom took the hit and lost his last heart. He turned toward Misty who was frozen in shock.

“Tom!” yelled Nark.

“...Why?” she articulated.

“No matter the situation or wherever you are. No matter who you have to face. As long as I live, every time you'll call my name I'll save you. Maybe you don’t love me, but I intend on spending my life protecting you and trying to make you fall in love with me.”

Tears started to stream from her eyes. He laid his hand on her cheek and wiped the salty trail. He smiled and got closer to her. He wanted to kiss her one more time. Just once before he died, no matter if she wanted it or not. He approached his lips from hers but disappeared before they could touch.

“No, no... NO! TOM!”

A violent pink Fae blew around Misty. It lifted Frost and her warrior and sent them flying against the invisible wall that prevented them from moving out of turn.

Frost looked at Misty straight in the eyes. The ice goddess’ irises had turned to a shiny pink. Misty, in a fit of rage, took Frost’s three hearts with her ability and the game was over. The barriers blocking the squares vanished and Ryu went to grab Noemi. Misty fell on her knees and in the back, Asuka did the same.

“Congratulation!” conceded Frost.

She did the usual formality. Chronexia became more opaque during the temporal break and disappeared without saying a word. She wasn’t in the mood to try to lift Misty’s spirit just because of that suicidal brat. Still, they had won thanks to him so she owed him one. That’s why she didn’t say anything this time. Embarrassed, Frost still tried to cheer her up.

“It’s just a game...”

Misty blew up. A game?

“Tom's dead because of a game?”

“Oh that’s right. I forgot about them.”

Frost smiled stupidly. She lifted her arms and the dead reappeared. To Misty's surprise but complete happiness, they were alive. Frost continued her explanations but Misty had already ran to Tom.

"They're dying figuratively, not literally," she said, embarrassed. "I have to be able to bring back my pieces too or I'd have to hire new ones after every challengers. I should have been more precise."

Misty jumped in Tom's arms. He caught her, half happy half amused. She was still crying, face buried in his neck.

"I was so scared!" she told him.

Tom smiled, stroking her hair and rocking her gently like he did at the Water city.

"Don't worry. I'm not leaving you just yet. I already told you, I'm here for you."

She started sobbing again. Asuka came near Gab. Her eyes were puffy from crying.

"You saved me," she whispered. "Again."

"That's one way of putting it. It's an amusing hobby."

Gab threw his blade on his shoulder and joined Tom. Behind, Nark approached in his high heels. Gab heard her, turned around, looked at him and said:

"Nah, too easy."

Nark ignored him and talked directly to the goddess.

"Why this costume?"

"It's just a harmless joke," she comforted him. "The mute one wanted costumes for you too, even if you were just bystanders. She's the one who designed them."

"Great job Marle," congratulated Gab, lifting his hand up.

Marle winked and clapped her hand in his.

"Remove it now," said Nark angrily. "And while you're at it, do you know how to get to Hyrtol from here?"

“I can teleport you there.”

“Oh! Yes! It would be dandy,” he replied, cynical. “This place is ridiculous.”

“Not as ridiculous as your costume,” replied Frost, insulted.

“Ryu,” called Tom. “How is Noemi?”

“She’s just unconscious, she should wake up during the evening. Her life isn’t in danger, don't worry about it.”

“I need to talk to you,” said Gab.

Ryu shrugged and the movement caused Noemi to whimper. She grabbed Ryu’s vest and slowly their body vanished from the room. Misty dug her nails in Tom’s neck. The pressure wasn’t painful, just a bit scary.

“*Don’t leave me,*” she thought. “*Ever*.”

Chapter 13:
The Wind Queen

Hyrtol was a magnificent city. It was probably the third biggest after Arenight and Edanqua. But despite all of its splendor, the city remained mostly plain. It had multiple thousands of inhabitants but its size allowed it. If Arenight focused its interests on politics and military, Hyrtol took care of the education and knowledge domains. The city spanned a total of 10 square kilometers and 20 percent of it was allotted to the world's library.

Some said it was a bit big for a library. Maybe, but few of them realized that this two square kilometers of paper and dust was only a small sample of the world's knowledge. Buried 300 meters underneath the earth, located between the plumbing and the sewer system, the real library was hiding. On the surface, only copies and rewrite of the important manuscript that shaped Mana as we know it could be found. Nobody could access the originals except for a few hermits who transcribed the important ones to make them public on the surface.

That place was a goldmine for professors from all over the world, but to their disappointment, without a written authorization from the king, access to the lower floor was forbidden. The only person who had free access to those archives was now under the master's control, kilometers away from there.

In the town's center, eight figures materialized in the darkness. They appeared in a street around eleven o'clock after leaving the Ice catacombs.

"That's one thing done," said Nark. "If I'm not mistaken, we only have three seals left? Electricity, light and wind. And thanks to me, we are now a few kilometers away from the Wind arena. Am I the best, or what?"

“Yes and your genius cost us 10 gold coins,” replied Gab. “You were in such a rush to leave that we didn’t get our gear back at the entrance.”

Nark stopped celebrating. Misty faltered and put her hand on Tom’s shoulder to avoid falling down.

“I’m not feeling very well,” she said.

“You need to rest?” asked Tom.

She nodded once and tried to run, but her vision blurred and she stumbled. She tried to stand back up, but she lacked strength.

“Leave me alone!” she screamed.

Tom frowned, intrigued and got closer to her.

“Please, go!”

Ryu shrugged and left first. Gab followed him. The two other girls hesitated but Nark dragged them with him. Misty vomited. Seeing that it was one of those nausea that she found so embarrassing, Tom backed up a bit so that he couldn’t see her. She hated being seen, but he was still standing nearby to intervene in case she needed it.

Tom sat at an alleyway’s corner and waited. During 15 minutes, Misty emptied her lungs while coughing. Tom thought that it was like if they had installed a sink in the street and were trying different flow rates. Misty was crying at the same time, but Tom didn’t say anything. With a heavy heart and an empty stare, he was looking through his goggles.

“Why?” asked Misty after a while. “Why do you hold me so dear after what… what I’ve done to you?”

“Ha, ha, you're funny. I already told you. To me, you are the perfect woman. For 10 years, I’ve been your best friend and I’ve secretly loved you. I know it’s hard to get out of that zone, but I never lied to you and now I feel like I’m not hiding anything from you. I know that I’m rather common, I don’t stand out, but my love is sincere. You thought that just because you said no to me I would give up? There's only one answer that will satisfy me.”

“Ha… You’re stupid,” she smiled.

“Maybe, but I passed my DUPE.”

“DUELS,” corrected Misty, amused.

After a few minutes of calm, Misty concluded that she was back to her normal state. She stood up and Tom handed her a bottle of water. She took it even if she wasn’t thirsty. Walking along the street, they found Gab leaning against the inn’s entrance. On the sign above the door, a pink heart was blinking.

“Everything is paid for, but there's an issue… it’s an inn for couples.”

“What does that mean?” asked Tom, unsure.

“It means that they refuse to rent us rooms unless a guy is matched with a girl. We tried to negotiate, but it’s their policy. So Ryu was paired with Noemi, Nark with Marle, Asuka with me and you two get the last one.”

“What about the other inns?” asked Tom.

“They’re more expensive and most of them are full at that time of the night. Anyway, it didn’t seem to bother the girls. I don’t sleep so I won’t be in mine.”

“Hum,” was Tom’s only response.

He faced Misty and asked her if she had any problems with that arrangement. Of course, she said no.

“Oh and get some rest tomorrow,” added Gab before getting inside.

“The princess decided that we needed a day off.”

Tom nodded to show his agreement. Misty entered the inn and headed to the room Gab pointed at from outside. Tom stayed with him for a while. Without looking at him, Gab asked him about her situation.

“So… How is she?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Before, when I was simply her friend, everything went well. Now I feel awkward in her company. I can’t stand making eye contact with her. I don’t know how to react…”

“You told her you love her so act accordingly,” cut Gab. “You keep on breaking her heart with your words. You think she needs t know even more

about how you're ready to sacrifice your life for hers? Misty already knows that and because she cannot give you an answer, you're making her feel guilty."

"... You think?"

"Do you think we stumbled upon that inn by sheer luck?" he said with a wink. "Marle and Asuka dragged us there for you and Misty. She needs you so go find her."

Tom smiled. To his surprise, he even chuckled. He turned around and headed toward the same room as Misty. He stopped in the entrance before closing the door.

"Thanks," he said.

Gab smiled once the door was closed, but it reopened almost immediately. Asuka appeared in a nightgown.

"You're not coming to sleep?" she asked.

"I was hoping to speak with your brother."

"He's asleep. He gave the bed for Noemi and took the couch," She saw his curious stare. "It's my cards. One of them increases the senses of touch, vision and hearing. Useful for a ninja."

"Ninjas are spying on their brothers? Anyway, if he doesn't plan on going out tonight, I guess it's useless for me to wait here. I'll take the couch."

"Why?" quickly asked Asuka. "I mean... The bed is big enough for the two of us."

Gab shrugged and entered the inn. Asuka followed him and closed the door behind her. Only a low click could be heard in the hallway. Tom sighed once more and turned the doorknob. He waited a bit and opened the door.

Misty was sitting on the side of the bed. She was ready to go to sleep. She saw Tom and smiled. He returned it and entered the room. He closed the door and Misty entered the bed. Tom removed his clothes and joined her. Back to back, the minutes were passing by slowly. Tom was cursing himself

for being such a coward. She was right next to him and he couldn't even turn around and face her. Slowly, he fell asleep. Unconsciously, he turned toward her and wrapped his arm around her. She didn't push him away. Tom had his nose in her hair. She smelled so good. The scent slowly lulled him to sleep.

***

Tom woke up in the dark room he was so used to visit during his dream adventures.

"Hey Tom, I was a bit bored. Everything's good in Hyrtol?"

Tom spat some blood. A knee on the ground, he was trying to catch his breath. He inspired profoundly. Something caught his attention. He wasn't sure about it, but he thought he caught on something different.

"You're spying on us?" he asked.

"Of course," replied the master. "I would be a bad opponent if I didn't know how my plan is unraveling. I hope you'll be in town tomorrow."
Tom breathed once again. The scent in the air. He had smelled it somewhere else before. It was Misty's.

"Misty isn't far," mumbled Tom.

The master tilted his head to the side. He chuckled a bit. Tom recognized this laugh, but he couldn't remember from where.

"Yes, closer than that, you'll die."

The serrated sword buried itself deep in his shoulder blade and pierced his heart.

***

Tom woke up in Misty's room. She was pressing against him and he had to grit his teeth so that her face wouldn't be sprayed with blood. He slowly moved out of the bed and headed to the bathroom located in their room. Tom spat in the sink and looked in the mirror.

"Tomorrow, right?" he said to his reflection.

The day off allowed the group to refill the provisions they had used the day before. The next day they would head to the Wind arena. Noemi woke

up in great shape, but as mute as Marle when it came to the subject of her previous adventures with Ryu.

They had planned on another nightly adventure to go capture the third dragon in the Tornado forest, a few kilometers away from Hyrtol. This forest owed its name to the dragon dwelling in it. Its presence was well known and everybody avoided the forest because the beast could create the worst storms. Their winds would uproot trees and some rumors said that the animal was able to create devastating electric discharges. All in all, a very tempting scenario for Ryu who planned to sneak out at first light with his accomplice.

When the time came, Ryu opened his room's window and slipped outside. Noemi followed. They walked for a few minutes in the still asleep city, but ran into Gab in an area where the houses started to spread out a bit. A fountain was decorating the district's center, surrounded by white cobblestone.

"This time you're aware that I can't let you pass," said Gab, leaning on a stone pillar.

"What do you want? What we do doesn't concern you," replied Ryu.

"True, but I'm naturally curious and this time I will beat you up if I need to. That way, you won't get to the next seal all mangled. Well, yes, but at least I'll know why."

"You think we can beat him?" asked Noemi to Ryu.

"Very unlikely," replied Gab. "You don't even have Fae…"

On the other side of the pavement, two auras burst at the same time. The green one surrounded Noemi while Ryu was burning with a blue one. Gab could easily count that they had about thirty thousand manas each. It was more than impressive since they were just kids, but they couldn't win against a trained mercenary like him.

"It would bother me to skin you, kids," said Gab, unsheathing his sword.

Ryu notched an arrow and drew his bow. Noemi lifted her staff. Gab appeared behind them.

“You don’t have what it takes.”

Ryu and Noemi dashed in opposite directions. Ryu released his arrow while Noemi took a book out of her bag. The pages flickered quickly under the wind of her dodge.

“Noemi, let’s not waste our energy against him, find a way to escape,” said Ryu.

“On it!”

Gab struck his sword at the arrow who bounced on it. Noemi quickly browsed the spells in her book. She turned the pages until she reached the chapter about escaping.

Paralyze the opponent? No. Smoke screen? Too risky. She needed a teleportation spell. There!

“Can you keep him busy for fifteen seconds?”

“No problems,” replied Ryu.

“I doubt it,” intervened Gab. “You won’t be able to match my speed.”

Gab charged at Noemi, sword lifted above his head. He turned it on the dull side so that he wouldn’t kill her. An arrow whistled next to his ear. Gab stopped in the nick of time to avoid it.

“I don’t have to match your speed. All I need is to know where you’re going.”

Gab abruptly turned and rammed into Ryu. The half-demon’s elbow hit the archer’s X-shaped scar. The impact threw Ryu to the ground.

“I simply want to know where you are going,” calmly said Gab.

Ryu started to fade. He looked at his disappearing hands and gave a nasty smile to Gab who kept staring at him. Ryu gave up.

“We’re capturing dragons,” he answered.

Gab sheathed his sword and turned his back to them. He headed back to the inn.

“Alright. Be careful this time.”

Ryu and Noemi completely disappeared. In the public square’s center, only the fountain remained, eternally pouring its water.

The next day, Tom woke up in top shape. To his great surprise, he learned that Ryu and Noemi had once again disappeared. He didn’t really care anymore. Anyway, if the master had something in store for him today, he’d rather leave Ryu and Noemi out of it. It would be two less potential victims.

Around noon, Tom ate with the rest of his team. After studying Misty’s map, Nark announced their next destination:

“So, here is what I would suggest,” he began. “South of Hyrtol, there is a fourteen hundred meters stone bridge. If we cross it, we should be two or three hours away from the Wind arena.”

They finished their meal and left. At one in the afternoon, they grabbed their backpack and headed to the public square. Six persons were standing in the center. Asuka recognized Vince, Sentron and Denver right away. The three others were total strangers to her but Gab seemed to be staring at the fourth one. He whispered his name with rage.

“Layroy!”

“Gab,” he replied politely.

The man, or rather the beast, looked a lot like Gab’s demonic form: a yellowish coat, red eyes and huge canines.

The two last members were people they had never met before. One of them, named Johnson, was a twitchy muscular man with flat gray hair and fingers covered by a metallic object. The other was even weirder than Denver. He had six red eyes divided in two rows and a green hairy skin. His arms and legs were twice as long as his body, but he was slumping on himself. Tom ended his analysis when Vince talked to him.

“We were waiting for you.”

“Likewise,” replied Tom. “But you're so late we were about to leave.”

"Oh! I'm sure it can wait," reassured Vince. "The Wind seal, I suppose? Yes of course."

Vince was talking to himself while pacing. The other generals were scattered around the fountain. Sentron was staring at Tom's team. He landed his sight on Asuka partially hidden behind Gab.

"Where are the black haired brat and his girlfriend?"

Asuka frowned.

"They're not in town."

"Then I have nothing to do here. I will leave the rest to you," he said to the other generals.

Sentron disappeared like he did in Ricena.

"Do you want to play, Gab?" asked Layroy. "You and I are beasts, this town isn't for us…"

Layroy vanished like Sentron, but reappeared right behind Gab and Asuka. He grabbed her with his gigantic paw. Asuka, surprised, yelled and struggled, but the animal was already running away with its prey. Gab unsheathed his sword and chased after him.

"Layroy!" he yelled.

Vince stopped pacing and snapped his fingers.

"Ah! That's it. I just got a great idea. Tom, you like ultimatums, right?"

"I always find a solution that satisfy me," concluded Tom, serene.

Nark and Misty were surprised by Tom's strange calmness. Sentron was after Ryu and Noemi, Asuka had just been kidnapped in front of him and he hadn't budge a bit. Nark questioned him about it.

"I trust Gab. If he's chasing that general, no matter his strength, he'll save Asuka. And he already found us once, I believe he'll be able to do it again."

"So!" cut Vince, insulted that they ignored him. "Here is what I intend to do: while Johnson, Denver and Dodger are ransacking this city, I'll

take care of the Wind seal. Let's see what is more important to you: saving the city or helping Misty? I'll give you two hours to get there."

Vince disappeared, leaving the three remaining generals to face the four of them.

"Why do we always have to run?" sighed Tom.

"What should we do?" asked Misty. "I can't let Vince destroy the seal."

"The two of you go," said Nark. "While Tom is facing Vince at the Wind arena, you will be able to free the sixth seal."

"What about you and Marle?" worried Misty.

"We'll take care of the city. We will join you once we get rid of them," he said.

"But…" hesitated Misty.

"Alright," agreed Tom. "I trust you as much as I trust Gab. Let's go, Misty."

Without waiting for her answer, Tom grabbed her hand and left toward the city's exit. He disappeared from Marle's and Nark's sight, leaving them facing the three generals who still hadn't move from their spot.

Nark glare at them nastily, but he spoke to Marle after a few seconds of silence.

"Tell me, Marle…" he started.

Marle looked at him. Did he had a question for her?

"You're really mute right? I mean… it's not an act, correct?"

Marle smiled, but she shook her head from left to right. She was indeed mute.

"That's good," said Nark relieved. "I don't really want the others to know my true strenght. You're half a goddess yourself so you know what raw power is like. I suggest you stand back and you leave them to me."

"Oh! You think you will be able to handle the three of us?" asked Johnson.

In an instant, a huge orange aura exploded in the center of the public square. If Tom or Gab had been here, they could have read a power of a hundred thousand manas. The strength of Nark's Fae slightly pushed Marle away on the stone pavement. She slid, raising a small dust cloud and whistled, impressed.

With the palm of his hand, Nark created a gigantic sun that he threw in the air. He disappeared right away and reappeared behind the green monster. He slammed his hand on his back and a powerful energy ray obliterated the body in front of him in less than a second. Only a shrill and piercing scream could be heard echoing in the public square. Once the light faded, there were only two generals left, included a slightly panicked Johnson.

"Handle?" sneered Nark. "I intend on annihilating the three of you." Narks eyes were pitiless.

"It's… It's nothing!" replied Johnson. "Dodger was the new guy, he was never good at fighting…"

"You want to try me?"

Nark slid his foot against the stone and raised his knee to hit Johnson who barely had time to block the attack with his huge elbow. Nark followed with a punch to the stomach. Nark was strong but Johnson was like a wall. Such a hit should have bounced on his abdomen, but the orange aura surrounding Nark's fists forced him to double over.

Nark put a foot on the fountain's ledge and propelled himself. His knee rammed into Johnson's jaw and sent him flying. Nark used his momentum to turn around and with the tip of his foot, he smashed the colossus' face into a nearby house. The wall cracked and his opponent disappeared under the rubble and a dust cloud.

Nark looked at Denver. He raised his palm toward the sun he had thrown earlier and divided it into multiple small spheres that rushed toward the small general. Denver didn't pay any attention to Nark. He was staring at

Marle while giggling. When the energy spheres were about to hit him, Denver vanished and materialized in front of Marle. A gold trident appeared from nowhere and he tried to impale her with it.

Marle stopped it with her mace's handle. Was she about to fight for the first time? Nark was curious, she was with them for more than a week now and she had never showed any aggressiveness.

"You know how to fight?" asked Nark, worried.

He couldn't let her take care of the general if she had never used this mace to fight.

Wind in her hair, Marle simply smiled. Suddenly, a bright purple aura surrounded her. The energy easily reached the same power as Nark's and then exceeded it of twenty thousand more. With a hundred and twenty thousand manas, Nark's irises turned purple. Marle spun her mace as if it was as light as a feather. With a quick blow, she hit the ground so hard it cracked. In a flash of purple light, the ground under her feet raised in the sky with half the city. Had she just forced a tectonic plate under another? Good thing the underground library wasn't as big as the city. If it was, the half-goddess would have sliced it in half. Marle wasn't taking part in battles often, but when she did, she showed formidable strength. What she could do with her brute strength really exceeded Nark's expectations.

"Fair enough, I'll leave the brat to you."

Nark drew a plasmic energy sphere and threw it in the rubble covering Johnson who jumped out right before it hit. He landed a few meters away, fist clenched and charged Nark in a blind rage.

Behind, Marle jumped down the 20 meters cliff and started to spin quickly. If she managed to hit Denver with that velocity, he would explode like a balloon.

With his trident, Denver hit in the opposite direction of Marle's momentum. The blow lost some of its power, but still sent the general crashing into the cliff. Marle landed delicately and faced her opponent who

was trying to get out of the earth wall. He was slightly bleeding. Marle and Nark were the strongest of their group but they hid it well when the others were around. Marle twirled and threw the mace at Denver. He narrowly avoided it and the weapon buried itself in the earthy stone.

Denver had to go. If Johnson wanted to die fighting, it wasn't his problem. He wasn't afraid, but he couldn't risk waiting any longer. Once Johnson would be dead, he wouldn't get the chance to slip away. With no further delay, he disappeared when Marle was about to punch him.

Behind them, Nark was easily resisting Johnson. He hadn't even been touched once, which was good since only one hit of Johnson's silver fists would be enough to break or dislocate his bones.

"So slow," complained Nark.

"I don't understand! You shouldn't be that strong!"

"I will destroy you and get rid of anybody standing in my way."

Nark punched the ground. A column of orange light swallowed Johnson's body and suddenly, nobody was standing in front of him. After a few seconds, he dusted himself and Marle joined him. Her purple aura had faded away, like Nark's orange one.

"You finished of the brat?"

Marle shook her head as a no. She gestured to make him understand that Denver fled.

"It's okay. Where are we going now? To help Misty and Tom with the seal?"

Marle refused a second time. With her hands, she mimed Asuka and Gab.

"You're right. We can't trust Gab to save her. And Tom knows that to meet us, he will have to turn back and cross the forest. We will find each other for sure."

***

In the Tornado forest, Ryu and Noemi were fighting the dragon for

two hours now. Nobody seemed to be taking over. Ryu's arrows weren't reaching it despite the elements he infused in them and each electrical discharge from the dragon was met with Noemi's invisible force field.

The dragon roared and landed in front of Ryu. The beast must have been 30 meters high. It was a purplish blue and long silver claws decorated its paws and wings. The animal was standing on its hind legs and from its long neck came out another roar.

"You understand what it says?" asked Ryu to Noemi.

"No, I never had time to study their language, I thought they were all dead!"

"*Τι αποζητάς;*" said a voice, resonating in their head.

"You heard that?"

Noemi nodded. The same words were heard again, louder, when the dragon roared.

"It's Greek," confirmed Ryu. "The same language than the relics."

Ryu shook his head. He had to answer.

"Χρειάζομαι περισσότερη δύναμη!" he answered. "Έχω ήδη στην κατόχη μου τον δράκο της Ανατολής και του Βορρά."

"*Νεαρέ, κέρδισες τον σεβασμό μου επιβιώνοντας εως τώρα. Θα ήθελες να κάνεις μια συμφώνια μαζί μου;*"

Ryu looked the animal in the eyes. What was it planning?

"*Εάν υποσχεθείς να αφήσεις την περιοχή μου, ορκίζομαι στην τιμή μου, πως ό,τι και να γίνει, θα εμφανιστώ και θα πολεμήσω στο πλευρό σου ρισκάροντας τη ζωή μου.*"

"Ryu! It's even better than turning into him!" said Noemi. "If you invoke him and also transform yourself, it would be two dragons at the same time."

"I know... Καλώς, ας είναι έτσι! Θα σεβαστώ την υπόσχεση σου!"

A purple light entered Ryu. Hidden underneath his clothes, a symbol appeared on his torso. A pact linking him to the dragon.

"*Ποτέ μου δεν εμπιστευτεί άνθρωπο. Μην με απογοητεύσεις.*"

The dragon took flight and disappeared in the forest's horizon.

"Ryu!" squealed Noemi.

Ryu turned around and saw Sentron holding Noemi by the throat.

"You are lucky that I received the order to not kill the both of you right away."

"Let her go," he said, notching an arrow.

"I hope you know where that forest's exit is. We will wait for you there in a very nice castle."

"Ryu! Help me, I'm sacred!" whined Noemi.

He aimed between Sentron's eyes and released the arrow. Sentron disappeared, taking Noemi with him. Ryu swore and started to run. A few minutes later, Gab caught up to him.

"You're following me?" asked Ryu.

"No, one of Vince's general kidnapped your sister."

"They caught Noemi too. They're waiting for us in a castle near the exit of the forest. It's a trap…"

"Of course it is." cut Gab.

***

Tom and Misty reached the Wind arena within the time limit imposed by Vince. The place was majestic, worthy of the other seals, but slightly in ruin. The arena looked like the Arenight Coliseum, but only a circular staircase was leading up on the outside wall. They had to climb it to reach the top.

Tom started to do so as fast as possible. Once he reached to top, he noticed the 50 square meters roofless room with an altar at its center. Vince was seating there and waited while swinging his feet like a child.

"No!" exclaimed Tom, short of breath.

He had fell into Vince's trap. Forcing him to run to reach the arena on time had greatly tired him out and he wouldn't last long in a fight against

the general. Misty was in the same situation. Tom would have to lead his greatest battle: helping Misty complete the trial and handling Vince.

Vince jumped down the altar and started to circumvent Tom. He had to distract him. Again.

“You’ve been waiting for a long time?”

“Since I left Hyrtol.”

“Then why didn’t you destroy the altar instead of giving us two hours?”

“I’m simply following my orders. You should ask the master yourself,” shrugged Vince.

“Misty, can you start the trial now?” asked Tom.

She headed toward the altar and right away, a small red-headed girl with a green ribbon in her hair appeared. She was wearing a green dress covered with a white apron. In her arms, she was holding a red ball and a cat as red as her hair was standing on her shoulder. She was about six years old.

“Hi,” said the little girl with a childish voice. “My name is Éole, the wind goddess.”

Misty wanted to ask her how old she was but refrained from it. It wasn’t the time for this. She quickly explained to her that she was a goddess in training and asked if she could start the trial as soon as possible.

Tom, hazblades in his hands, was staring at Vince, standing still in front of him. Both were listening to the conversation between Éole and Misty. The wind goddess giggled.

“There is no trial here.”

“How so?” asked Misty. “How can I conquer the seal then?”

“I’ll activate it myself,” said Éole, adorably astounded. “I’m the queen of this place, I’m the one in charge after all.”

Vince frowned. He didn’t like this at all. In his hand, the same serrated sword that Tom saw in his dreams appeared. He charged his opponent and Tom counterattacked immediately. He hadn’t recovered yet,

but he had to create an impenetrable line of defense.

"The thing is," continued Éole, "I'm not very good at unlocking seals. I only did it twice before. I will manage to do it but you might lose consciousness."

Misty bit her lower lip. If she fainted, she wouldn't be able to help Tom against Vince. She gave him a worried look. Tom saw it.

"It'll be alright!" he promised while blocking Vince's attack.

Misty hesitated.

"Do it! It will be alright!" he insisted. "I'll be there when you wake up."

"Okay," gave in Misty. "Let's do this."

Éole let go of her ball and it floated in the air like its owner. The cat on her shoulder pounced to catch it. With her tiny hands, Éole summoned a thick green light. Time stopped spontaneously.

A ghostly projection of Chronexia appeared and became more opaque. If she kept it up, Misty would soon have a twin. Two Misty would be great if only Chronexia wasn't so bitter towards Tom.

Seconds started to flow again. Tom blocked Vince's sword by crossing his hazblades. He pushed it back and slashed out at Vince's torso. The attack was clumsy, but it wasn't intended to wound him, it was only to create a distance between the two. Vince jumped back to avoid it.

Behind Tom, a dull sound indicated that Misty had just fainted. He had to protect her until she woke up. Éole talked to him.

"I succeeded, but she fainted. I'm sorry, I was sure I could do it this time. Alright! Come, Foehn," she said to her cat.

The cat turned its head toward its owner. It brought the ball back and jumped on her shoulder.

"It's only you and I, Vince. You won't get near her."

"That won't be necessary."

Vince lifted his palm toward Tom and clenched his fists. Tom froze in

panic. Behind him, Misty's body was caught in a green bubble. The same one that had captured all the members of the elite.

"I'm taking her with me," said Vince.

"I won't let you!"

That's when a gray storm exploded on top of the arena.

"You won't keep your promise, Tom. She'll wake up and you won't be next to her. She trusted you."

Tom's right eyelid twitched. How dared he? Vince already had the guts to separate his family and now he was attacking the only person he had left? He had been weak to let his parents be taken, but he had grown during his adventures. During that month, he had realized how dangerous life was. The training sessions he had with Misty and Noemi in their schoolyard was nothing compared to the outside world. Tom now understood death and that if someone was taken from him, nothing could guarantee that he would see that person again someday.

Tom pointed his two hazblades in front of him. He aimed at Vince and rubbed his blades against one another, like he did in the Coliseum. He would kill Vince. He didn't care about killing a living being. He wasn't like Misty. He had to protect her. Always!

A ray shaped like a cross headed toward Vince. It disappeared into a flash of light. Once the energy dissipated, Vince was floating above the arena, out of Tom's reach, and with Misty in the green bubble.

Vince shook his head. He looked serious.

"I'm not giving you a choice. She's coming with me."

He disappeared once again and the green bubble flew toward the east.

"Vince!" yelled Tom.

He wouldn't com back. He had taken Misty with him. She was slowly fading on the horizon. He had to catch up with her right away. Think! He had to find a solution. If only he could fly! An idea popped in his mind.

“Éole!”

The little red haired girl, who had seen everything, gave him an intrigued look.

“You're the wind queen, right? That’s what you said earlier.”

“That’s right,” she replied, proudly.

“Can you use your wind to send me after my friend?”

“The Boss doesn’t like it when we help out humans.”

“Please!” pleaded Tom.

Éole bit her thumb, unsure. Tom insisted one last time. She gave in. To be honest, Éole thought he was really charming and that if she helped him, she would be on his good side. At least that’s what the millenary six years old believed.

With a wide motion, she called a gust of wind that swept Tom away and carried him eastward after Misty. He had to catch up with her, to not let her out of his sight.

“Thank you so much,” said Tom before he left.

Adrenaline traveled through his body. He was suspended in the air by a gust of wind that could let him fall at any time. Tom breathed to calm himself. The air was pure. It was filling his lungs and helped him recover slowly. A few minutes went by. He moved fast above the ground. He was now above the Tornado forest.

In the distance, he saw Misty’s bubble dive toward a stone structure. The distance between them decreased. It was a castle. The green bubble slipped inside through the roof, taking its prisoner inside.

***

In the forest, Ryu and Gab were running together. Gab admitted being surprised to see Ryu follow his demonic speed without issues.

“Why do you want to save my sister?” asked Ryu.

“It’s Layroy I want. Your sister is simply collateral damage. But I’m having fun saving her. And you? You want to save Noemi?”

“Just her. I keep my promises. She’s my partner so I will get her back and kill Sentron while doing so. That way, he won’t be an issue anymore.”

They could finally see the forest’s exit. Gab and Ryu ran past the last trees. They saw a plain and a gigantic castle. In the distance they saw a green bubble going through the roof. The trap couldn’t be more obvious but they didn’t care. They both had things to do in there.

They kept running toward the castle and progressively slowed down while approaching the wooden door. They stopped. In the distance, they could hear a whistling sound. They looked up and saw Tom plunging from the sky. He landed before them, one knee on the ground, hazblades in his hands, surrounded by his aura and willingness in his eyes.

“Misty's inside,” he said.

“Noemi was captured by Sentron,” added Ryu, taking his bow.

“And Asuka completes the trio,” concluded Gab while grabbing his sword.

“Let’s go get them,” said Tom.

Tom’s aura reached fifty thousand manas. On his left, Ryu exploded with an equally powerful blue energy and so did Gab, in red. He threw his sword on his shoulder. The three rivals approached the wooden door and broke it down with one heavy blow.

Chapter 14:
Vince's Castle

Locked in a cage, Noemi was weeping. She had just been thrown in the same cell as Asuka. The teenager wasn't able to keep up her adult demeanor. She simply was a kid who acted tough. Asuka tried to comfort her. She took Noemi in her arms and rocked her gently.

"It will be alright," she hummed. "Everything will be alright."

Slowly, Noemi calmed down. Asuka looked around. Their cage was located in a very big room. She knew they were in a castle, but she never would have thought that it was made of one unique 30 square meters room. Their prison, built on a landing, was on top of some stairway at which foot Layroy, Vince and Sentron were silently waiting and staring at the door. The three of them formed a perfect straight line and were turning their backs to their captives.

"Let us go!" ordered Asuka.

Nobody answered. They didn't even deigned to look at her. They were just pawns, targets… bait. Asuka remembered the events that took place in the forest. The monster who had kidnapped her had been very clear. Its claw as sharp as a knife on her throat, he had politely explained the situation:

"I couldn't care less about your life. I am a scientist and Gab is my experiment. He is the only one I'm interested in and I know that he'll come after me if I take you hostage."

When they got to the castle, Layroy had thrown her into that cell and locked the door before taking his position at the right side of the staircase. A few minutes later, Noemi had joined her, crying, and finally Vince imposed himself. They were now reduced to be bait for Gab and Ryu.

A few more seconds went by in silence but then Misty arrived through the roof. Like a ghost inside a green bubble, she floated through the materials. She arrived inside the cage where the bubble exploded. Misty bounced and crashed violently on the stone floor. She was unconscious but was still breathing, fact that reassured the team's conjurer.

At that moment the door exploded. A gust of wind blew inside the castle, raising a cloud of dust. Ryu, Tom and Gab appeared. Tom stepped forward and saw Noemi and Asuka in their cage guarded by Vince and his sidekicks.

"Is Misty with you?" he calmly asked.

"Yes, she's alright," confirmed Asuka. "But she's unconscious."

Ryu looked at his partner. When their eyes met, he saw how puffy they were from crying. Noemi moved her lips without talking but Ryu understood clearly:

"*Help me, Ryu.*"

Another tear ran down her cheek. Ryu nodded once then focused on Sentron.

"You really think that a 14 years old kid can measure up to a mercenary like me?"

"What I think is none of your business."

On the other side of the room. Layroy was talking with Gab.

"It was very rude of you to escape from my laboratory."

"Was it?" replied Gab. "You know what happens when animals are locked up against their will. You should be happy that you managed to keep me for 15 years. I'm here for the clean up."

"You think that coming back with your companions will change anything about you? You're not human anymore, I bettered you. Thanks to me you are now faster, stronger, fiercer!" said Layroy, exalted.

"You talk too much," replied Gab.

"Gab!" called Tom.

He turned his head toward the voice. He didn't even have the time to answer that Tom was questioning him again.

"You said that you were looking for Vince. But now things have changed and I make it my personal business. Do you mind?"

"Absolutely not. Vince was only a mean to find this scientist. He's all yours."

As soon as he ended his sentence, Gab disappeared. He rushed toward Layroy, sword pointing straight forward. Layroy avoided him with a backward jump. His animal instinct helped him feel danger closing in. He wouldn't be caught by such an ordinary trick.

Layroy jumped up and unsheathed his claws. He then balanced himself on Gab's sword that he was holding horizontally.

"You owe me everything, Gab!" hissed Layroy.

"You were accomplices! You took my life!"

"Good," cut Tom.

He had paid no mind to Gab's and Ryu's fights that also had already started. As soon as he got carte blanche for Vince, his expression changed. Ryu didn't care about him and Gab had confirmed that his target was the scientist. And even if Asuka and Noemi hated Vince like nothing else, they never vowed to follow him to the end of the world to kill him. As long as they found their parents, they didn't really cared about what would happen to that monster. But it wasn't the case for Tom. Misty wanted him dead. He had taken her parents from her. He would pay. He had promised it!

The gray aura around his body started to reach his hazblades. Vince frowned. In his palm he started to grow one of his usual fireballs.

"Thirty years ago, before I died, I decimated the whole elite team. Then I did it again. What makes you believe, Tom, that a lowly human like yourself could stop my era?"

"Why should I care about your stories? I didn't listen when Flora told them and I still don't care about your life now. Not everybody acts the

same way. If I fall, I will stand back up. Forever, until I win. My justice reigns and my judgment severs!"

Vince threw his fireball at Tom who took a quick step toward it. With his black hazblade, Tom cut the meteor vertically and let both half fly next to each side of his face before they exploded behind him.

Tom took advantage of the blow provided by the explosion, crossed his hazblades and cut Vince with his improvised scissors. The general barely had time to make his serrated sword appear to block the blades. If he didn't, he would have been cut in half like his meteor.

"Your willpower won't be enough to beat pure talent."

That was it. Tom had searched for so long and the solution was so simple. He had finally found it, the emotion flowing in his veins, the one making his soul pulse. What pushed him to save Misty, what made him fulfill the promise he made her, he made himself. Tom finally discovered what the gray aura meant. He had a Fae of Will!

Tom's power spiked. Both of his hazblades, still held by Vince's sword, started to close in slowly, first on his clothes then on his shoulders' flesh. Vince let go of an exasperated sigh. He had to step back to avoid being overtaken by his opponent.

Tom was right, he was a menace for him right now, and if he wasn't more careful, he would be killed by his target.

"Isn't it a coward's way to fight with two swords when your opponent only has one?" asked Vince.

"I don't want to hear anything like this coming from a traitor like you," replied Tom. "But it's true that I could kill you with only one of these."

"No!" screamed Asuka. "Don't do it, he simply wants your fighting style to change so that he'll get the upper hand!"

Tom ignored her. He lifted his light green hazblade in front of his eyes so that Vince could see it clearly, then slowly made it turn back in its original sphere shape. Tom kept it inside his palm to give himself one more

handicap. With his hand full, he wouldn't be able to switch his black hazblade from his left hand to his right hand during the fight.

Vince took that opportunity. With a quick movement, he plunged to Tom's right side. He was unarmed and completely open to any attack. He would cut his torso with his serrated sword. Just before the impact, Tom moved his blade with a quick wrist move. He caught his sword's hilt and placed his forearm inside the weapon on the dull edge. He switched his weight to his right leg and acted as a counterweight to Vince's attack. His blade found a way between two teeth of his opponent's sword. With his downswing, Tom used his fist to violently break Vince's nose.

The Ixcross strength allowed him to lift the veteran an send him flying into a stone pillar. The castle shook a bit, but no major damage was caused.

"Ryu!" chirped Noemi.

He had just suffered the same treatment as Vince. After having been clawed by general Sentron's weapons, only a kick was needed to propel him backward. Ryu's fighting style couldn't measure at all to the one of the hand-to-hand expert. Firing arrows needed some amount of preparation and as precise and skilled as Ryu was, he needed a bit of distance to aim and release. At most it would only take a second or two, but Sentron wasn't leaving him any time to do so. He was too fast and he wasn't leaving any opening just because he was fighting against a kid.

His magic took a bit more time than releasing an arrow so it was completely unusable. If only Noemi was with him. He smiled at this ironic thought. He, the eternal loner, was now dependent of his partner. If he wanted to keep it this way, he had to free her. Traveling the world had allowed him to learn how to count on something else than his arrows and magic. Now he had dragons.

Ryu moved the tiny rock that fell on him. He stood back up. Around him, his aura was still swelling. He took a quick glance at Noemi, grabbing

her cell's bars. She was still begging him to save her.

"It's the first time I'll use it in combat. I'll have to win in twenty seconds. If not, I will lose."

Ryu's nose lengthened and turned into a brownish muzzle. His neck stretched and he started to grow a crest. His teeth sharpened and on his fingers, his nails turned into claws. His body was now covered in scales. The transformation took five seconds, he only had 15 left.

"What the…" stammered Sentron.

With a wing flap, the earth dragon took flight in the general's direction. He rammed him with is hard head and sent him crashing in the castle's rubble. Ryu landed, steadied his paws, opened its maw and spat the same sand jet that had hit him in the forest.

The attack afflicted Sentron head on. Ryu was getting tired mentally. He only had time for one last move. He stood on his hind legs and used the front ones to hammer the general as much as he could.

Seconds went by and Sentron was still alive. Wounded for sure, but he was still standing up. Ryu turned back into a human and collapsed. He had no strength left. Once more, Noemi screamed his name.

Asuka sighed. Seeing him turn into a dragon exceeded her expectations but she had learned not to be surprised at what her brother was able to do. Asuka's behavior changed. She went from worried to motherly. She crouched next to Noemi and put a hand on her shoulder. They looked at each other. Noemi's sight was still blurry with tears.

"Since he got here, you begged him to save you. Right now, he's fighting with all his might for you. Ryu isn't the talkative kind, but he's passionate. He always reaches his goals. I thought you were his partner. You should always be by his side."

"I'd like to help him!" pleaded Noemi.

"Card of Metal," answered Asuka.

The iron bars that were holding them prisoners thinned and melted

into a silver pool. Asuka made her way to Misty's unconscious body. Using this card earlier would have been useless and suicidal, but now that everyone was fighting, this escape would be a field trip.

"Join him, I'll get Misty out of here."

A greenish layer appeared on Noemi. Asuka was right. What was she sniveling for? She had a pact with Ryu. He would take care of her as long as she assisted him during each of his fights. Without further hesitations, she headed to the staircase. She jumped on the stone railing and slid all the way down. During her way down, she made her titanium staff appear.

The bloodied general had grabbed Ryu. Sentron lifted him with one hand and with the other he was aiming at Ryu's heart with his blades.

"Apoca…"

"No" groaned Ryu. "You don't know how to use it…"

"…lypse DELTA!"

In a second, a translucent bubble grew in front of her staff. The sphere was cracked with hundreds of fissures. It rushed toward Sentron and surrounded his body. Inside, the general's flesh teared even more. Blood spurted and splattered every part of the bubble's inside. He let go of Ryu right away and crashed into one of the castle's wall. Above him, the stained glass windows exploded under the impact caused by Noemi. She ran to Ryu.

"You… shouldn't intervene in my combats," scolded Ryu as best as he could.

"I didn't. My role is to support you, right?" reasoned Noemi. "I simply sent him back a little. Delta isn't very powerful. You should go take care of him while I heal you."

Noemi ended her sentence with a wink. Every traces of tears had disappeared from her face. Ryu's respect for her grew even more. He didn't have to carry his burden alone, he could trust her. He smiled at her and thanked her while she started her treatments.

Ryu had to finish this fight. Noemi's bubble had just exploded and

Ryu was unable to hold his bow without shaking. Noemi was healing his wounds, but he knew that she couldn't do anything about his exhaustion. He couldn't even focus anymore. No more magic, bow, dragon. What did he have left? Oh right… this.

"Nemesis! Celeste!"

Ryu's remaining Fae vanished with the creation of the two goddesses in front of him. One was wearing a long black dress with broken green lines and a tall hat in the same material that was covering her eyes. Her skin was as black as coal. She didn't say anything. At her right, a second goddess was walking. She had a milky skin and long platinum blond hair. She was wearing a white dress, almost translucent.

"Who are they?" asked Noemi.

"The goddesses of vengeance and purity. I have to summon them simultaneously or they would kill me."

"Aaaah!" shouted Sentron.

He ran toward the two kids like a blind man, without seeing the two goddesses. Looking closer, he realized that Noemi's attack had burst his eyes. He was lost. Both goddesses raised a bow made out of light. Black for Nemesis and white for Celeste.

Each released one arrow. From their attack, only a luminous trail was left and crossed path over Sentron's heart. Both attacks kept going behind him and the castle's wall exploded. Their target had been annihilated. Both goddesses lowered their bows: their work was completed. They could disappear now.

Asuka landed between the goddesses. For once she was part of the action and her face showed conviction. A yellow aura slowly appeared and became opaque, but nobody was paying attention to her twenty thousand manas. Asuka had laid Misty at the foot of the stairs. She had to capture those goddesses!

She threw the white papers in her hand at them. Like Gaia, they were

absorbed by the blank cards.

A few meters from there, Tom and Vince were still fighting. They had received an equal amount of blows, but none of their vital organs had been damaged. They both started to feel wary. Tom fell a few times, but he stood back up every time. One knee on the floor, he leaned on his sword and recovered for the umpteenth time.

“If you keep on falling, at some point you won’t stand back up!” said Vince. “You can’t stand up forever Tom.”

“Then I will make sure that I don’t fall again. Until the end of that fight I won't collapse anymore.”

“We'll see. Can you still protect your dear Misty?”

Vince had just seen Tom’s weakness, unconscious at the foot of the stairs. It was too easy. Treacherous, but why should he care? He turned toward Misty, lifted his sword then brought it down. A khaki aura appeared and rushed toward her.

Tom wouldn’t be able to reach Misty and move her before the attack hit her. Moreover, It wasn’t a simple sword strike that he could block. Like every other times Misty was in danger, Tom acted on instinct. Nobody would hurt her! He stepped between her and the attack. He had to take it.

“Your heroism will be your downfall, Tom” smiled Vince.

The energy hit Tom in the chest diagonally. It was heavy and it cut through his clothes, flesh and stopped on his ribcage. The energy bounced on his sternum but his blood sprayed everywhere. A few drops fell on Misty’s cheek.

Tom stumbled for a while. He wouldn’t fall again!

Vince hit his heel on the floor, rushed and punched him. The blow sent Tom flying. He recovered midair and landed on his feet. He slid and raised a dust cloud. His knee almost touched the stone but Tom forced hit upward. He jumped in the direction he was coming from. Vince was too close from Misty.

Tom had to finish this fight. It was going on for too long and all the blood he was losing would kill him in a few minutes. Noemi would take care of him after he wins. For now, he had to trust in the Ixcross.

"*Ixcross,*" he thought. "*Help me on this one.*"

Without him realizing, his speed increased. He drew his fist holding the hazblade back and, once he got to his level, violently punched Vince under his chin. It lifted him about 10 meters in the air.

Tom suddenly slowed down, his body stopping instantly. He followed Vince with his eyes and jumped in his direction. Like his father 25 years earlier, Tom was hovering over Vince. His jump let him reach the roof. Tom turned around, placed his feet under it and propelled himself toward Vince. Once again, he hit him with his loaded fist, this time in the chest and completed his descent.

Vince crashed on the floor and spat some blood. He wasn't able to move anymore. The blow had paralyzed him against the stone. He looked under him. In Tom's fist was the hilt of his white hazblade. During his last assault, Tom had tightened his grip on it and had forced it to transform. The blade had grown in his body. Now it was standing proudly, impaling Vince to the stone.

Tom was laying on his back at the general's right side. Vince's blood started to form a pool underneath him.

"You fell," whispered Vince.

Tom didn't answer right away. He sat up and caught his breath a bit. His blood was mixing with Vince's. Disgusted by the idea of sharing with this monster, Tom stood up and faltered. He left his white hazblade stuck in Vince and grabbed his other twin blade. Tom moved to Vince's left side.

"As long as the fight is not over, I won't collapse again. That's what I said, but the fight is over."

"You cheated," said Vince under his breath. "You used your second sword."

“This is war, Vince. You, more than anybody, should know that cunning is necessary during a fight. Since the beginning, I planned on using that weapon at the right opportunity. Every blows are allowed, you hypocrite. Only the strongest stands in the end. I don’t care about your legend.”

Vince sighed and his head joggled. He wouldn’t escape this time.

“Your parents are not in this castle. If you kill me, you'll never find them.”

It was his last plea. He had to be strong. Tom had a good heart and wanted more than anything to find his parents. He would spare him and then he would be able to lead him on again.

“Your master needs me. He’ll show me the way,” said Tom with no pity. “It’s one thing to take on the elite, but you put Misty’s life in danger and you killed her parents. I warned you earlier…”

“What?” chirped Vince.

Tom wouldn’t spare him? But he was the good guy. Good guys always forgive the mistakes of others.

Tom pointed his sword at the right of Vince’s neck. He looked at him bitterly one last time. Like another few times in his life, Vince felt fear. It was over for him.

“My Justice reigns and my Judgment severs!”

He looked in front of him. Without remorse, Tom removed his arm. Vince’s head rolled at his feet but he ignored it. It wasn’t over. Gab was still fighting against Layroy. He had to help him. Misty was safe for now, but he couldn’t risk a stray attack hurting her by mistake.

Tom removed his white hazblade from Vince’s body and stumbled toward the noisy section of the castle. Behind him, Noemi and Asuka ran over there too and Ryu was slowly following them. He had troubles standing up. Tom studied Gab’s fight.

Layroy had been wounded by his sword on his chest and Gab had multiple scratch marks but, in both cases, they were just flesh wounds. Tom

got there first and their fight ceased right away. Layroy created a distance between him and Gab by backing up toward a wall.

“Go away Tom,” said Gab. “This is my fight.”

“He’s all yours, I’m simply protecting Misty from the ricochets.”

“Oh! Then you won’t let your little brother party with us?” complained Layroy. “I really should have taken him instead of you. He seems to be such a better specimen. That being said, my master had to kill him so I wouldn’t have had a reject like you, Gab.”

“What is he talking about?” asked Tom.

“He doesn’t know? Oh what a great manipulator you are, Gab. I think that I'll let you talk about it. We'll finish our fight at my master’s castle. I don’t like my odds of survival here. Five against one doesn’t make for a bright future.

“You’re not going anywhere,” raged Gab.

Gab rushed toward the demon, but he was already gone. Like a hologram that had been turned off.

“He’s gone,” confirmed Asuka.

Tom sighed. He did it. He had protected Misty and when she’d wake up, he would be by her side. His legs couldn’t carry him anymore and he collapsed. His Fae turned off. Someone caught him before he crashed on the ground. Tom lifted his head. It was Gab.

“Noemi, can you take care of him?” he asked.

The half-elf nodded rapidly. Tom was laid down the floor. Noemi removed his outfit’s shreds and started the treatment.

“You’re not going after him?” worried Asuka.

Gab realized she was talking to him. She was obviously talking about Layroy, but Gab only shrugged with disdain.

“I don’t like the fact that he got away, but I’ve been wanting to kill him for 15 years now. A few days won’t make a difference. And I’m not the type to leave in the spur of the moment just to follow my emotion.”

“What was he talking about?” insisted Tom.

Gab sighed.

“I’ll explain later. For now just make sure to heal.”

“Alright,” finished Noemi. “I healed what I could. You should rest in order to recover from your exhaustion. I suggest that we go establish our camp outside. This castle could collapse at any moment.”

Gab helped Tom up, Asuka carried Misty and Noemi served as a crutch for Ryu. They exited through the gaping hole created by the three boys when they arrived and headed toward the plain’s center. Nark and Marle should be there soon so they made sure to be easy to spot. The place was completely deserted, it shouldn’t be too hard.

“Card of wood, card of fire,” called Asuka.

Logs pilled themselves out of nowhere and started to burn. Asuka bordered it with rocks while Noemi was checking on her patients.

“Sleep now,” she ordered.

Tom had a lot of trouble falling asleep. He was exhausted of course, but the sun would still shine for a few hours. He asked Noemi for a sleeping pill and fell asleep under the condition that they would wake him up if Misty regained consciousness. Reassured, Tom improvised a makeshift parasol and fell asleep in a few minutes.

An hour and a half later, Misty woke up. She sat up and looked around her. This place was certainly not the Wind arena. Asuka was seating inside a pentagram and was performing a ritual with two of her cards. Noemi was still checking on her patient and a bit further away, Gab was looking at his sword while spinning it a few times. Her attention went back to her friend right away.

“Tom!”

Noemi saw her and lifted her index in front of her lips to encourage her to be quiet. Misty stopped talking right away. She approached him on all four.

“Are you alright?” worried Noemi.

Misty nodded. A few seconds went by before Noemi talked again. She looked at Misty with her steel gray eyes.

“Will you come with me for a minute?” she whispered.

Intrigued, Misty agreed. Noemi stood up and they walked further away.

“I know that I wasn’t with you a lot lately,” she began. “But what happened between you and Tom?”

Misty told her about the events at Ricena where Tom had confessed his love for her and about the ice trial that Noemi had completely missed. Noemi frowned slightly. She looked strangely like her mother when she had that half annoyed look on her face.

“Before I ask you why you said no, let me tell you what Tom did for you during the last two hours.”

Noemi began her story, describing each event in details, from the moment she passed out to the moment she woke up. She particularly insisted on Tom and Vince’s fight, reporting every word that had been said. Without a doubt, Tom was a lot more in love with Misty than she had ever imagined. During the whole story, tears streamed on the cheeks of the pink haired girl.

“I’m not blind, Misty. Tom and you have known each other your whole lives. I know you're as much in love with him as he is with you. So why reject him?”

The half-goddess expression became somber.

“You don't understand,” explained Misty. “I'm a goddess. When I’ll be a 100 years old, Tom will be dead. What’s the point of being in love with him knowing that I will lose him anyway? All it does is hurting me for naught.”

“Are you stupid or what?”

Misty closed her eyes. Tears were sticking to her lashes. She had just made her best friend angry. When she opened her eyes, Noemi was standing

in front of her, fists on her hips and a big smile stretched on her lips. She seemed compassionate. She burst out laughing. Misty didn't understand what was going on. After a while, Noemi unveiled her an aberrant revelation.

"Goddess of time," insisted Noemi. "A hundred years or a thousand, you're the one manipulating them. If you don't want to be alone, stop Tom's internal clock. You will be able to heal him forever by changing his body's time. When you'll become a goddess, you'll be a better healer than I'd ever dream to achieve."

Misty froze. She was absolutely right. She was so stupid! Chronexia had omitted that detail. Maybe she hated Tom but that was a low blow. But out of everybody, Misty was the one to blame. Like Noemi, she started to giggle through her tears. The half-elf gave her a toothy smile.

"Let Tom rest for now," she said.

They returned to the camp. While he was still sleeping, Misty took advantage of their bond to ask her about her relationship with Ryu. Now that the group knew about Ryu's dragons, she didn't have to avoid the subject anymore.

"I don't know if it's love," she confessed. "But when I am with him, I want to become stronger. He makes me feel alive. This power quest excites me…"

She never completed her sentence. Nark and Marle appeared in the distance. They had seen them and were running toward the camp.

"You didn't get bored, right?" asked Nark. "We just came from the castle. Thanks for getting rid of Vince."

His face expressed honesty.

"It's Tom you should thank," said Misty.

"You became a grave robber, princess?" taunted Gab.

Nark turned his head toward him and Gab pointed at Vince serrated sword on Nark's back.

"You accused me of wasting gold pieces after the ice trial. I'll sell it in

the next town and will give you back your precious shiny rocks."

Gab didn't answer. He didn't want to wake up Tom and Ryu, but that wasn't necessary. Nark's conversation with the others had woken up Ryu. He didn't take sleeping pills so his sleep wasn't as deep as Tom's.

He noticed the two newcomers and stood up. Noemi joined him right away.

"Do you feel better?"

"Yes, thank you. I just need to stretch my legs. I'll go for a small walk. I'll be back in a few minutes.

"Alright. Don't go too far, okay?"

Ryu nodded and left. At first he walked with a limp then stretched his legs before he started running. Marle was already busy getting supper ready. She had become their official cook. It wasn't fine cuisine but everybody loved it. As promised, Ryu came back a few minutes later. Tom woke up during the evening. They had just started eating and the sun was set. Like a professional, Noemi checked him up and gave him a bowl of Marle's soup.

Tom ate in silence until he saw Misty sitting nearby him. She smiled heartily and waved her hand.

"Are you alright?" worried Tom.

"Yes, thanks to you."

"Noemi," growled Tom. "You promised you would wake me up when she regained consciousness."

"Yes because it was the only way to get you to sleep," she replied with the same tone.

Tom became moody. At the back, Gab cleared his throat.

"I think that now is as good as ever to explain what Layroy was talking about."

Tom left his empty bowl at his feet. He wanted explanations about that man. He seemed strangely linked to Gab.

"To keep it short, Tom is my blood brother. When I was five, Layroy attacked our parents and kidnapped me while thinking I was Tom."

"Lies. My parents would have told me about you and you're also a half-demon," replied a skeptic Tom.

"I'm getting there" sighed Gab. "During those 15 years, Layroy used me as a test subject. He turned me from a human to a half-demon and continued his tests until I managed to escape, two months ago."

"I thought that holding a sword to prevent you from transforming was a bit strange," admitted Asuka.

"It's simply one of Layroy's tests. He had to keep me in human shape because otherwise I would have been a menace for him. He knew very well that I do not control myself in my demonic shape. That's why a blacksmith and I forged a sword especially made for me. A seal is locked inside it."

"My parents would have never abandoned you," insisted Tom.

"They never had a choice, Tom. He wanted the Watson's son. They didn't take the right one so they threw me away. I still remember that day perfectly."

***

A small five years old was keeping company to a two years old. The two brown haired kids were racing through a garden behind a house: of course, the older one won without any difficulty.

"At least you know how to run, Tom," he consoled him.

Dyol opened the door suddenly. She ran to the two kids. She tried to sound calm but blood was trickling from her temple. She was out of breath.

"Hey! Gab, Tom, would you like to play hide and seek? Mommy will be the one counting, okay? I'll count to one thousand, so find the best hiding spot in the world. Let's go!"

"Great!" said Gab happily. "Come on Tom, I know the perfect place. Mom will never find us."

Dyol stood up and ran toward the house. She counted loud and clear

so that the kids could hear her. One… two… three. The door slammed but the kids could still hear the following numbers until eight.

Gab took his brother's hand and dragged him toward the forest. He tried to keep up a pace that Tom could match. He already knew where to hide. It was rather simple but Gab was sure that nobody could find them there.

It only took a few minutes for them to get there. It was a tall tree, slightly bigger than the ones around and on the ground, its roots were going upward creating a small hole big enough for an adult to fit in. Gab went inside first then helped Tom.

Fifteen minutes went by. Gab always used this hiding spot and Dyol knew it well, but time kept passing by. To make it more enjoyable, Gab struck a conversation with his brother.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked.

"I want to be strong like dad," said Tom.

Gab chuckled with his childish voice. He looked at Tom with his overprotective big brother expression.

"You will never be better than me. I'm the older one so I'm the strongest. But don't worry, I'll protect you."

Tom wasn't listening anymore. His eyes got used to the darkness beneath the roots and he just saw a rabbit that hadn't moved since they went in. One of its paw was wounded and it was shaking in fear of the intruders that were so close from its hole. Tom got a bit closer and petted it a bit harshly, but the animal didn't move.

"Be careful Tom, it's hurt. Stay with the rabbit, I'll go get mom. She will be able to heal it."

Gab got out of the hole and ran toward the house. He was excited. Not only he won the game but they also found a rabbit. Once Gab arrived in the garden, he froze. His parents were laying on the ground, covered in blood. Before them was a small army led by a big monste covered in yellowish fur.

Dyol saw her son as soon as he got past the last bushes.

"Go back and hide!" she panicked.

The animal bared its fangs, satisfied. Achille tried to stand up, but his wound and the army were keeping him grounded. Even his Fae was barely activating. If only he knew about the golden aura's meaning.

"Is that your son?" asked the animal.

"No!" lied Achille. "He's the neighbor's kid, Gab."

Gab got near Dyol.

"Mommy, we found a rabbit and…"

"Mommy? That's perfect. Take the kid and don't hurt him. He belongs to the master."

Two soldiers grabbed Gab. Achille aura burst out instantly. He stood back up with great difficulty. Nobody would take away his sons.

"That's useless," sympathized the animal.

He hit his heel on the ground before Achille could stabilize himself and hit him with the palm of his paw. Achille flew back and smashed his house's wall. His Fae disappeared.

"I'm a scientist," he explained. "I don't get any pleasure from killing, but I'll do it if you leave me no choice."

He disappeared and his army followed, taking Gab with them. Only a cry of protest echoed against the partially ruined home's walls.

The 18th day of the 10th month of the year 866 was the day the Watson family lost a member

***

Tom listened to Gab's traumatizing story without uttering a word. His parents wouldn't have abandoned their son, but if he was taken by force, they couldn't do anything about it. The elite members weren't invincible.

"I can't remember anything before the age of four," confessed Tom.

"But a few details make sense now that I think about it. The pictures on the forbidden room walls and your name. Mom said it once. She said that

it was the person my dad was looking for. If everything happened like you said, it makes sense that they never told me about it."

Gab smiled. After all this time, his father had never stopped looking for him.

"When we met the first time," said Gab, "I told you I was looking for some people. Layroy was one of them and you were the other, Tom. I'm happy to see what you have become."

"That being said," intervened Ryu, "there's something bothering me."

Ryu talked? That was uncommon. They stopped listening to Gab's story and turned their attention to Ryu.

"One of us is the master they're talking about."

Chapter 15:
The Electricity Kingdom

A heavy silence fell after Ryu's statement. It's true that they had all heard about this so-called master. The one pulling the strings all those years. Ryu was saying he was one of them?

"I don't want to get into details," he continued. "But one of the seven of us is the master for sure. I'm excluding Tom of course. I doubt that someone would plan such a complex suicide. So there is only the seven of us left. I could say that it's not me, but I have no proof and simply saying it could cause you to suspect me even more, which would be the contrary of what I'm trying to achieve."

"Are there any others that we can exclude?" asked Nark. "Noemi or Marle for example."

"No," replied Gab. "Every one of us is a suspect. Although Marle was created after everything started, Mana could have planned everything. Vince came back after being trapped into her sphere of life. Noemi is a half-elf. I may not have any prejudices, but half-elves are very smart and live a lot longer than humans. Moreover, she knows a teleportation spell. It would be easy for her to vanish during the night."

"But it's not me!" said Noemi, shocked.

She was slightly panicking. How could they think that she was the bad guy? The master was holding her parents hostages. Although, if Gab's story was true, they all had close ones that were made prisoners, except for Marle and Misty. Misty chuckled and they all turned toward her.

"I guess I'm the main suspect," she said with a sad smile. "Goddess of time…"

"No," shrugged Gab. "My story of me being Tom's brother could be a lie..."

"It's not important," cut Tom. "I trust every one of you. If that theory is true, I simply hope that it's not you, Misty."

Misty seemed embarrassed. She wanted to tell him that it wasn't her, but it wouldn't prove anything. To lighten the group's mood, she took out the map Flora gave her in Terfie.

"We only have two seals left to visit. The closer one is the electricity seal, but we will have to walk for a few days. According to the map, there is no nearby town apart from Quake that is located in the opposite direction and would be too big of a detour."

"In that case, let's go to the Electricity kingdom. We have enough provisions for a week," said Asuka.

Everyone agreed on their next destination. First they would go to the Electricity kingdom and then the Light altar. Tom simply hoped that he was right and that despite the fact he had killed Vince, the way to finish his quest would be shown to him. But for now they needed to rest.

Tom only had one question. It would be the first thing he'd ask to that master once they would meet in person. He didn't care about his nocturnal premonitions. During his trip, Tom had gotten better. If he had remained the same, then maybe it would have happened like in his dreams, but now he was stronger. He would fight him and win. He had killed Vince, the biggest menace of their century's fifties. Tom fell asleep feeling victorious.

***

Everything turned black. His surroundings changed. Once again, he found himself in the execution's room. He was in front of the shadow who took a malevolent delight in killing him every time he went there. This time would probably not be different. Although Tom could take the opportunity to finally ask that question that bothered him. The master talked first.

"Don't feel too bad about killing Vince, I had to get rid of him soon

anyway."

"Why? What do you want from me?"

"I already told you, Tom. You have to die by my hand."

"Why?" asked Tom. "Why would you go through so much troubles just to kill me?"

"It's none of your business, but I'm a good person so I will explain everything once we meet face to face. I should move somewhere else. Look at the clouds and don't die on your way here, my dear Tom. These dreams are affecting you more and more each time."

The master impaled Tom who jolted awake. A few days had passed since Gab's revelation. They had now reached the Electricity kingdom, but since they got there early in the evening, they decided to wait until the next morning before going in.

The sun was starting to rise. It must have been eight thirty in the morning. Tom had slept shirtless because of the heat and when he woke-up, he noticed a bleeding gap near his heart.

"Noemi," whispered Tom.

He was losing all his blood. He had a hard time to move and felt extremely dizzy. Sitting in a tree, the half-demon opened his eyes to the morning's noises. He jumped out of his bed and landed next to Tom. He looked at him quickly and his lips twitched.

"Noemi!" insisted Gab.

The half-elf suddenly woke up. She looked all around her before seeing Gab crouched next to his brother. She grabbed her staff and joined them while swearing.

"What happened to you?"

"I don't know," lied Tom under his breath.

"Gab, for gods' sake don't let Misty come near us," said Noemi. "I don't have the time to deal with another of her crisis like the one she had in Terfie."

Gab nodded and stood back a bit to be able to contain Misty once she would wake up. Such a gaping wound could not be closed in a few seconds. Like when she grew back Ryu's arm, she had to rebuild his heart, which was rather problematic since while she was doing so, nothing pumped the blood in the rest of his body.

With tears in her eyes, Noemi slapped Tom.

"You can't fall asleep!"

Tom coughed some blood while laughing. The loud noises finally woke up everybody, including Misty. Once she saw Noemi hovering above Tom, she tried to approach but Gab was in her way.

"Noemi's order, you cannot pass."

Misty raised an eyebrow, insulted. She tried to go around him but Gab insisted.

"Temporal stop," said Misty.

Everything froze around her. She bypassed Gab and started the flow of time again. Gab sighed and gave up. Misty joined Noemi and as she had predicted, she screamed. She wanted to ask her what happened but she was too focused on the issue at hand.

"I won't be able to make it in time," whined Noemi. "His other organs need the oxygen from his blood."

"What if I hold my breath?" joked Tom.

"You won't leave me, right?" asked Misty to Tom. "I still have two seals to complete. I won't make it without you."

Misty's eyes welled up with tears. She didn't want to lose him now that she was allowed to love him.

"What do you mean? You have a lot of teammates ready to help you."

"It's you I want!" persisted Misty. "You were here for each of my trials. I need you, Tom!"

Misty's Fae suddenly burst.

"Don't worry," whispered Tom. "I'm… holding on."

A voice sighed in Misty's head.

"Let me take control for a few minutes. I have an idea that may save his life."

"Alright," quickly answered Misty.

The pink aura extinguished exactly like it appeared. Misty's behavior changed, she was calmer and more confident. She laid her hands on Tom.

"Chronexia, right?" asked Tom.

Misty nodded.

"I'll put your body on pause so that Noemi can heal you. See you in a few seconds."

Her tone was mature and serene. A translucent impact hit Tom's body and he completely stopped moving. If his body was frozen, Noemi could rebuild it without having to worry about his other vital functions. He didn't lose any more blood and didn't need the oxygen it carried. Noemi could work without panicking.

"How long can you keep him like this?" asked Noemi.

"An hour maybe. Don't waste your time."

Noemi worked faster. During the said hour, she rebuilt his heart and even finished in advance. She started to think for a moment then resumed her work where she had stopped. She asked Chronexia if she could keep him like that for 10 more minutes. Her assistant agreed but asked her why.

"I love to cheat," confessed Noemi. "I will make his heart muscles thicker. It should help him recover more quickly when he's out of breath and make him all around stronger. His heart will pump more blood and he'll have as much stamina as Gab."

Noemi finished her upgrade and welded back his thoracic cage and sternum's cartilage. She informed Chronexia when the flesh was completely closed back.

"You're rather skilled," praised Chronexia.

"The best, " she bragged with some pretentiousness. "My medical

knowledge is quite heavy, but Tom is a lot stronger than I am. We each have our specialty, right?"

"That's not what I meant," said the goddess. "Your friend was dying, but you kept your cool."

"Of course. I'm the team's medic. If I can't save the others when they need me, it would be comparable to Tom losing a fight. And since we're about to face a trial, he has to be in top shape. Can you restart him?" asked Noemi. "I'd like to see if he's still alive."

"Alright. Misty will take control again. I'm tired. We're even for your sacrifice at the Ice catacombs, now." she added to Tom's frozen body.

Misty's behavior swapped again. Her worried expression resurfaced and Tom started to cough. His heart was intact, but it wasn't beating.

"No!" yelled Noemi. "I knew it would happen!"

She shoved Misty and straddled Tom before applying different type of pressures without success. Tears started to well up in her eyes.

"Will you beat, you stupid heart?!"

She hit Tom with her clenched fist.

"Please, Gab, Nark" politely called Ryu.

Gab grabbed Noemi and Nark, Misty. They dragged them away from Tom. Both girls protested but Ryu stood in front of them.

"Σπίθα αστραπής!"

From Ryu's index exited a simple electrical discharge. It hit Tom right on the chest, then stopped. Ryu did the same thing a second time and then a third time. Tom finally coughed and Ryu stopped.

Tom took a deep breath and started to regain his senses. Once he could move again, he sat up and observed the situation. Obviously, he had created problems for everybody. The last thing he remembered was Chronexia pausing him, but Ryu was the one who reanimated him?

"You saved me?" asked Tom.

"No. You should thank Noemi for that. She spent an hour knitting

you a new heart. The thought of wasting her efforts annoyed me so I helped a little. It would be a bother if you died now, isn't it?"

"Thanks," said Tom. "Thank you Noemi, I didn't know you were that good."

"It's not your after school training sessions that gave me the chance to duplicate and heal organs so I trained at home."

"Are you feeling good enough to take on the Electricity kingdom?" asked him Gab. "Or would you rather sit this one out? I could help Misty in you place, easily."

"I'll be alright," replied Tom. "Let's eat and go."

Marle and Asuka had already prepared breakfast. Since they couldn't do anything to help Tom, they had to focus on something else.

They dismantled the camp after their meal. Tom was jumping in place. He claimed that he felt in excellent shape since Noemi's healing. He looked at the Electricity kingdom. It was a stone structure shaped like a lightning rod. The walls were concave and the central spike reached high in the clouds, as far as the eye could see. Tom remembered the darkness trial. He hoped that it wouldn't be another climbing challenge.

Once everything was packed, the group headed toward the entrance of the infernal tower. Ryu and Noemi stopped in front of them.

"We won't take part in that trial," politely said Noemi.

"Why?" asked Nark.

"There is a fourth dragon nearby and I would like to capture it," explained Ryu. "I already own the earth, ice and electricity dragons, but I'd really like to get the fire one."

"Would you rather help us for the trial and then we'll help you catch the dragon?" offered Tom.

Ryu declined by shaking his head and left toward the east. Before leaving, Noemi told them one last thing.

"We will be back for the last trial. I mastered my teleportation spell. I

will be able to join you directly. Good luck!"

Noemi joined Ryu who was already walking ahead and both of them disappeared. Gab laid a hand on his brother's shoulder.

"You're rather sloppy. What if Ryu is the master? Would you help him get stronger?"

Tom shrugged and crossed his arms behind his head. He started to walk again and entered the kingdom. He had just reached the god's domain.

"If Ryu's the master," casually supposed Tom, "it would mean that none of you are and you will be able to help me control his dragons. Unless it's too hard for you… big brother."

Gab smiled, amused. He was absolutely right, but it only applied if Ryu was the master. Otherwise, those dragons would be a great addition to their team.

"Yes," added Nark. "Don't worry Gab, I will leave the smallest for you. Even you should be able to handle it."

It was very dark inside. Light was coming in through the entrance but after a few meters they were all blind except for Gab and his feline vision. Ten meters in front of them, a well was dug in the earth just like in the Fire ruins. This one must have been around 10 meters wide.

Electrical discharges came from inside it and lit the room sporadically. After a while, a huge yellow head emerged from the well and two hands grabbed each sides. Tom was wondering if the god was hiding from them. Marle politely kneeled and bowed her head like she had in front of every other gods.

"Hi," said Misty. "I'm here to take on the electricity trial."

"I love electricity," cheered Tom. "It's my element."

"Yes, after all, it's what saved your life," noted Asuka.

The man exited the well. He must have been 12 meters high. He was shining in the dark and his cloud-like beard was vibrating with tiny discharges. He was wearing a white toga that clashed with his bright yellow

skin and he was wearing a gold crown on his head. Undoubtedly, this well was his hiding spot. Now that he was out of it, they could see their surroundings: the room was at least 500 meters deep.

“My name is Jolt,” said the flying man. “I am the god of this place. Welcome. My trial is very amusing and simple. The challenger must start from there,” he pointed at them then traced an invisible line to the end of the kingdom, “and reach the other side.”

“That’s it?” asked Asuka, excited.

“It’s never that easy,” replied Tom. “Where's the catch? Each seal is linked to its own element one way or another. Lava, waterfalls, darkness, mud storm and ice statues. Where are my lightning bolts?”

A certain amount of deception could be heard in Tom’s voice. The only trial that wasn’t linked to its element was the wind one, since there was no trial at all. And it was without mentioning the tornado that had sent Tom multiple kilometers away.

“Tom!” called Gab.

Tom turned his head toward his brother. He had grabbed a round stone and carelessly threw it the same way they had to go. As soon as it landed, a luminous dot appeared in the sky and a lightning bolt struck from it. It hit right where the stone was. Tom’s face lit up and he laughed like a kid.

“Your guardians can come with you if they feel like sacrificing their life so you can win,” added Jolt.

“It’s alright, I can do it alone,” said Misty. “They won’t have to.”

Misty turned around. Tom was stretching his legs by switching his weight from one to another regularly. On his right, Asuka had put her backpack down and was rummaging inside. Gab removed his metal boots and left them at the entrance. He bounced his sword around and leaned against a wall, smiling. In the background, Nark was tightening his gloves straps so that his fingers would have a better grip. All of them showed unwavering determination.

“You don't have to help me,” she quickly said.

Tom smiled and stood up. He approached her and grabbed her by the shoulders. He looked at her in the eyes.

“Stop doing that. Your job is to win the trial. Mine is to make sure you survive. Cross that line and nothing will happen to you.”

“I’m ready,” said Asuka.

The group looked at her: her look had completely changed. Her usual purple outfit was replaced by a dark navy one that covered her from head to toes. Only her slanted eyes were visible. She was now wearing boots and even a small helmet under her outfit.

“What is this?” asked Gab.

“I’m a ninja and this is my mission outfit. Its material happens to be a great electrical insulator. Even if the lightning bolts touch me, it won’t do anything. Marle, you’re not participating?”

Marle smiled, closed her eyes and tilted her head. With her index, she pointed at her mace. Multiple jewels were incrusted in it, making it a lightning bolt magnet. Tom could understand that she didn’t want to venture there under those conditions.

Marle closed her fist and nodded vigorously. In any case, she was wishing them the best of luck.

They had to run for half a kilometer. They were not professional sprinters. Gab was fast but on short distances only. To remain alert and keep his endurance, he had to keep the same pace as the others instead of rushing forward.

“I will help you there,” said Nark. “The lightnings are attracted by movements. As soon as one of them is charging, I will hit it with a plasmic energy ball to intercept it.”

“Great idea,” replied Tom with conviction.

He grabbed a bottle of water before beginning the race and drank it all. Running would dehydrate him so he chose to take care of this issue

before entering the minefield.

Careless because of her insulated outfit, Asuka went first. She took ten steps before the first lightning bolt started to charge. As soon as he saw it, Nark threw an energy ball as big as a fist at it.

Asuka kept going in the same direction. In the sky, the bolt detonated, pierced Nark's defensive wall and hit the conjurer. She stood still, screamed out of surprise and then collapsed. An acrid smoke was coming from her outfit. Nark flinched when he saw his tactic fail.

"Asuka!" called Gab.

"My plasmic attacks aren't big enough to cancel their power," explained Nark.

That was the only explanation he could think of. He had to charge them more, but throwing balls as big as a fully grown pumpkin would drain his energy in no time. Gab rushed to Asuka and crouched next to her. Tom and Misty were still behind the starting line.

"I'm alright," said Asuka. "The intensity surprised me but I'm not hurt. The lightning bolt simply paralyzed me."

"Gab! Don't stay there too long, you're wasting my energy," said Nark.

"Move," said Asuka. "Unlike you, I can take it."

Gab grabbed her by the waist, threw her high up and caught her in his arms, one hand behind her back and the other behind her knees. With one heel impulse he scampered away with a one second headstart. The lightning bolt was closing in fast but an energy ball, bigger this time, interposed itself.

"Thanks!" yelled Gab begrudgingly.

"Why did you risk it?" asked Asuka.

"Those lightning bolts release heat. You may be immune to the tension, but you will burn if you get hit by all of them."

Gab put her down and she thanked him once again. She had stopped

counting how many times he had saved her.

"You're coming?" asked Tom while dashing past them.

Misty was running in front of him. Gab followed Tom and they hurried side by side with Asuka behind them. It was raining lightning bolts. Nark was able to block most of them but a few still found their way to the ground.

After a while, two started to charge at the same time. They didn't need to mention it to know that Nark couldn't take care of both.

"I'm canceling the one on the right," he yelled.

Gab tapped the ground and plunged left. Asuka turned toward him, still running but Misty stopped abruptly. She wasn't in range for the lightning bolt to hit her but she could still burn from the heat it emitted.

The lightning started its way down when Tom grabbed her by the hand and dragged her toward him. His Ixcross caused her feet to leave the ground and she rammed against him. She bounced back and faltered. Tom grabbed her by the shoulders to prevent her from falling.

"Sorry, are you alright?"

Misty nodded vigorously and they started to run again. Tom held her hand to make sure they were going in the same direction at the same pace.

Nark was still shooting his bombs. His amount of energy had become incredible, but Marle could see that it was decreasing fast. Even his attacks were less intense as the seconds passed.

With each discharge missed by Nark, the group changed direction. It took everything for them to reach the 350 meters line. The lightening bolt became more powerful, faster and struck more often causing Nark to collapse from exhaustion. His forehead drenched with sweat, he had a hard time to move. He wanted to be stronger, to help her so that Tom would be proud of him, but he was so tired. They had to finish what was left of the race on their own. Marle approached him and wrapped his arm around her shoulders to help him up.

Since the lightning bolts' striking pattern was so unpredictable, they had changed their formation multiple times. Now, Misty was in the lead, tagged by Tom. Way behind them, Gab was followed by Asuka. A light in the sky caught the ninja's attention. It was charging and aiming at Misty.

"Misty, you're being targeted!" she screamed.

She was used to it now so Misty took a sharp turn to the left, but the light followed her.

"It's still aiming at you!"

The lightning struck. Even if she had tried to lose it by turning in every direction, the discharge acted like a homing missile. It would find her no matter what she did. Around, the other lightnings calmed down.

The discharge detonated above Misty who was frozen with fear. Eyes closed, she waited for the impact. Tom couldn't protect her from that. If the lightning aimed at her, he could shove her in any direction but it would still reach her.

Tom's body bounced in front of her. He had jumped above her head to cover her from the discharge.

"Tom!"

She rushed to his side. He was still alive but his body was burnt here and there.

"I'm okay," he lied. "Hurry and finish the trial."

"Why do you keep on risking your life for me?" she cried. "I'm not worth it!"

"I think that you are. When you will be in love with someone, you'll want to risk your life for his and help him make his ambitions a reality…"

"Tom! It's aiming at you," warned Asuka. "It's going to be a huge one, get out of there!"

"You heard?" scolded Tom. "Finish the trial."

"No!" replied Misty.

Her pink Fae burst. Tears in her eyes, she stood in front of him arms

opened wide.

"Is it wrong to want to protect the person I love more than anything?" asked Misty. "You more than anyone should understand that I don't want to lose you."

A gray light lit the room and blinded Misty for a moment. Once she could see again, she saw Tom's face. He had knocked her down on the ground and was on all fours above her while making sure to not touch her. The lightning strike would hit him but she would be spared. If what Asuka said was true, he wouldn't survive this one.

"Wrong? No, it's not wrong, but it's stupid," replied Tom. "And you are not stupid. You had the best grade on the SPLUDE."

Tom coughed blood. He turned his head to avoid staining her with it. The lightning lit up the sky and fell fast. Misty saw it approach behind Tom's head. She grabbed his face and kissed him.

She would be electrocuted with him, but she refused to lose him now. If Tom disappeared, she had no more reasons to collect the seals. She would stay with him until the end. The lightning bolt sizzled then vanished.

A few meters away from the childhood friends, Gab's sword buried itself in the ground. Blue discharges were still wandering on it. He had thrown it above them like a spear, and since his weapon was made from conductive metal, it had absorbed the shock.

The storm calmed down. Gab and Asuka managed to rejoin the other two. Tom was petrified. Misty kissed him? Why ? She didn't love him. Did she changed her mind?

"Let's hurry !" said Gab.

He forcefully separated Tom and Misty and loaded his brother on his back. Asuka helped Misty up. They had enough time to reach the end and complete the trial before the storm picked up again. Dragging Misty by the arm, Asuka followed Gab who was rushing to the finish line.

The storm stopped completely. They had foiled it. Jolt disappeared

in an electric filament and met the contestant at the finish line. Seeing that the lightning bolts had stopped, Marle carried Nark to them. Once they got there, they were done collecting the seal.

“This was your seventh trial,” confirmed Jolt. “You are not a goddess yet, but I know what's in store for you during the last trial. You should stop now.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Nark between two breaths, insulted. “After completing all those challenges, you hope that we will give up?”

“Misty, that’s your name, right?” asked Jolt. “I’m sorry, but you won’t win the next seal. If you value your life, give up now. You’re far from being strong enough, physically and emotionally, to win. You will fail your last test. I talked about it with the other gods and since you are unable to kill, it will be fatal.”

“It doesn’t change anything,” replied Tom. “If Misty can’t do it, then I will help her…”

Tom jumped off Gab’s back to prove his point. Misty could count on him. He was there since the beginning and it was thanks to him that she had reach thus far. He would keep on helping her.

“Don’t worry Misty,” said Chronexia in her head. “I know what the last trial is. I’m not allowed to tell you, but I can assure you that I’ll win. There is no chance that I'll lose now.”

Misty nodded and Jolt shrugged. He had done his job and had warned her. It was her decision now.

“You’re feeling up to it Misty?” asked Gab. “It’s the last one.”

“Yes, come on, let’s get this over with and go save your parents. The seal of light is a few hours walk southward. We could finish today if Tom feels better…”

“Yes, the lightning bolt only shook me a bit. I’ll ask Noemi to fix me up when she comes back.”

The team headed back, walked next to the well and reached the exit of the Electricity kingdom. In the background, behind the structure, a small stone altar was shimmering with a purple light. They didn't have time to pay any attention to it. It was a jewel similar to the one Tom and Misty saw near the Water city. Each seal probably had their own stone located nearby it.

***

Ryu, drenched in blood, was standing in front of a 40 meters high red lizard. They had entered the dragon's lair from the south. It was a cavern near Onyxvalley. There were multiple holes in the walls, letting some sunlight in. The beast had wrapped its tail tightly around Noemi. She had let go of her staff and was screaming while it tried to suffocate her. The animal growled while clicking its forked tongue.

"*Πώς τολμάτε και χρησιμοποιήτε τα κειμήλια που μαζί έχουμε εφεύρει, εναντίων μου; Εσείς οι άνθρωποι είστε ποταποί. Θα πρέπει να την φάω.*"

Once again, Ryu drew his bow and aimed at the dragon's tail that was approaching its mouth.

"Άφησέ την κάτω αλλιώς θα χάσεις την ουρά σου!"

"*Με απειλείς, με μόλις αρκετή δύναμη για να μπορείς να στέκεσαι. Δεν έπρεπε να έρθεις εδώ, μικρέ.* "

The dragon opened its mouth and let Noemi slip toward it.

"Σκίσε, βέλος ανέμου."

A wind blade came from the arrow and cut the dragon's tail near its tip. The pain caused the animal to hiss and forget about its prey momentarily. Noemi fell and bounced on its scaly skin during her whole descent. She quickly got a hold of her staff and tried to go back to Ryu while avoiding the dragon's flailing amputated tail. When she finally joined him, she had to heal his wounds.

It only took her 10 seconds to bring Ryu back to his usual state. He was still tired of course, Noemi couldn't change that and he wasn't expecting

that kind of miracle anyway.

“We're really screwed this time,” admitted Ryu. “He’s so big that my arrows are like bee stings. My spells are useless, I don’t have any gods left to summon and I won’t dare to use my dragons. I don’t have the stamina to keep their shape long enough and I wouldn’t like to see the third one rebels…”

“May I ask you something?” asked Noemi. “Why do you refuse my help except when I heal you? Are you afraid that I’d get hurt? You don’t trust me? You hate me?”

“No,” replied Ryu. “That’s not it. You're great, really. But an offense mentality is completely different from a support one.”

Did he just confess his love? Ryu was the least sentimental person Noemi had ever met. Was that his way of telling her that he liked her? She giggled softly.

“I appreciate you worrying about me. Really. Without you, I would still be a scared little girl. But now, I believe I’m different. And I would like to keep on changing.”

Ryu smiled and looked at the dragon in front of them. It hadn’t moved since the beginning of their conversation. They were staring at each other. Which one would be the first to flinch? Ryu gave up and looked at his partner. In her eyes, he could see a tenacity that he only ever saw in her.

“Very well,” said Ryu. “Impress me. I’ll be watching.”

Her green Fae burst and lit the whole cave. She was shining like a jewel. Noemi already knew how to win against that dragon. She had read about them and she knew its only weakness. She knew how to win but she needed a bit of preparation beforehand.

Noemi threw her staff in the air. The titanium weapon twirled like a cheerleader’s baton. She then took a small circular pill from her pocket. She placed it between her molars and bit it violently. The pill broke and Noemi swallowed it. She took out a syringe from her jacket and injected its content

into her jugular. Her pupils contracted and veins appeared in her eyes. For a few seconds, her concentration was at its peak.

Noemi's power skyrocketed, breaking the record established by Mack. Slowly, an emerald green tint appeared in Ryu's irises.

"*It's more than a hundred thousand manas!*" he thought.

On its way down, Noemi's weapon stretched and swelled like a balloon. Her two meters staff was now five times bigger. Noemi had to wrap her arm around the weapon to hold it. Despite the ton of metal between her fingers, she didn't collapse under its weight. Unfortunately, she would never be able to move with such a cumbersome item. At least that's what Ryu thought.

Noemi disappeared in the blink of an eye. She was in the air, right-side of the dragon's head. She swung her staff like it was a wand and hit the animal's head which sent him flying toward one of the cave's walls. Before it hit it, Noemi was in its trajectory. She lifted her palm in front of her and like Nark, a ray of light came out of it. The plasma swallowed the dragon, slowed it down and sent it flying the opposite way.

The fire dragon hit a stalagmite but Noemi didn't let it fall. She swung her staff in the air, creating a green luminous arc. The attack hit the dragon who finally fell back down.

"*Πώς τολμάς και μου στέλνεις τον υποτακτικό σου;*" spat the dragon.

"Τι έγινε, δεν αντέχεις τη ζέστη;"

"*Ενοχλητίκο μικρό παλιόπαιδο!*"

The lizard stood up and opened its mouth. It spat a river of flames toward Noemi.

"Noemi!" worried Ryu.

"Ασπίδα!" she ordered.

The flames bounced on an invisible bubble surrounding Noemi. Inside the burning tornado, Noemi had thrown her staff like a javelin. It flew and its length stretched again. The weapon entered the dragon's maw who

completely stopped moving.

"Επέκταση," whispered Noemi.

Multiple bloody titanium spikes came out all over the beast body. It fell on the ground, dying slowly. Ryu approached it and looked at the spark of life fading from its eyes.

"Μου αρέσει να βάζω ανθρώπους να κάνουν τις βρώμικες δουλειές μου." said Ryu.

The spikes retracted inside and Noemi grabbed her bloody weapon. She quickly rummaged through her pockets for another syringe. She found it and injected its content like she did with the first one. Her Fae disappeared instantaneously.

"Sorry Ryu, I'm about to fai…"

Noemi fell before she could finish her sentence. Ryu barely had time to catch her. He lifted her, one arm wrapped behind her back and the other behind her knees. He carried her away and laid her down near the entrance.

"So much power," he whispered. "I like you more and more, Noemi Watson."

Chapter 16:
May the Countdown Begin

The strangest things were floating in the sky. Tom studied his mental calendar. Yesterday, he, Misty and the rest of the group had challenged the Electricity kingdom. Now, all six of them were in front the Light altar, the last seal, but they were not inside yet. Why? For multiple reasons, Tom was still wounded, the group was exhausted from walking the whole day, Noemi and Ryu still hadn't came back and they had to ready up mentally. What would happen when Misty becomes a goddess? Because Tom was sure to succeed, the opposite was impossible. Yet, his usual concerns were clouded by this vision.

Multiple kilometers away, an immense stone structure was hovering like a bird. It was blurry because of the distance, but Tom could clearly see a castle on a piece of land. It was like if someone had unearthed it and threw it in the air. If only gravity could do its job and bring it back down.

"Seriously!" said Asuka, insulted. "A flying castle? It's so cliché, it almost makes me sick."

"You think we'll find the others there?" asked Misty.

"It seems to be our only lead," reasoned Gab.

"Let's go see?" suggested Asuka.

"Another time," concluded Tom. "The master only wants to show me the way. He wants us to complete our task here. Anyway, I doubt any of you knows a way to get there."

Surprisingly, Tom was right. He knew what would happen to them because of his dream. He had to make sure that Misty became a goddess. It was four in the afternoon. Should they wait for Ryu and Noemi a bit more?

Another hour and if they still were not there, they would begin the trial.

Twenty minutes before Tom's self-imposed time limit, both of them appeared. To be honest, Tom fully expected to see them come back half-dead, but both were unarmed.

"Did you succeed?" wondered Misty.

"Of course," confirmed Noemi with a nod. "It's nice to have waited for us before you activated the last seal. Thank you."

"Could you take a look at Tom?" asked Gab. "He got electrocuted."

"I could, but now that Misty has unlocked her seventh seal, she's a better healer than me."

"I don't have your knowledge," apologized Misty.

"Then I'll give you my book of healing as a gift for your incoming success. Everything's in it, from anatomy to surgery. You will even find a few pages about some animals like dogs and blackbirds. Just study it during your free time," encouraged Noemi.

She rummaged through her backpack and gave Misty her biggest book. Misty accepted the gift with an exaggerated politeness in front of her teammate's smiles. While Misty was storing the book in her own backpack, Noemi made Tom go through a few routine tests. The teenager had a bit of fun at his expense by making him stare wide-eyed, then by pretending she wanted to test his reflexes by hitting his knee with Marle's hammer and finally by laying ice cold items on his skin. She giggled while giving her diagnosis to the group.

"He's as good as before. With the new heart I gave him yesterday morning, he could have survived a way bigger shock. Misty, you want to try and heal his other wounds? Technically, you only have to turn back the action time that happened on Tom's cells. Don't go too fast or he'll be a four years old again."

"May I?" asked Misty, embarrassed.

Tom offered his palm so that she'd take place to his right. Noemi

stayed back but close enough to react quickly if something went wrong. Misty examined his wounds. Thanks to his Ixcross, they had already started to scar lightly. Go back in time? That wasn't an issue. She had already done it multiple times without them knowing, it was hers and Chronexia's secret. But now she had to target something specific: Tom. She would take his time.

Misty started and the wounds reopened instead of healing. Tom gritted his teeth. Startled by the wounds worsening instead of healing, she stopped.

"You go back in time," Noemi explained. "His wounds had started to heal, so every seconds between now and the attack will only make his wounds worse. You have to go back before he got struck by lightning."

Misty nodded. She understood the idea. The slower she'd go, the more in pain Tom would be. With that in mind, she worked faster.

"That's enough… Misty, stop!" screamed Noemi.

She was going too fast. She went back before the lightning and Tom's chest started to open. The morning before the trial, Noemi had performed surgery on him. If she went back more than that, she would tear his heart out. Gab shoved her to break her focus. Misty regained control of herself. Tom's chest was open but his renewed heart hadn't been touched. Noemi quickly closed his wound with one touch of her staff. Tom thanked Noemi. Misty stood back up and stammered:

"Tom… I'm really sorry. Chronexia got out of control."

Tom smiled, took her in his arms and hugged her. He whispered a thank you in her ear. Misty's heart filled with love. Her pink Fae started to surround her.

"You're horrible," she replied, tears in her eyes.

"Let's go put an end to those trials," he added out loud.

Unlike the Electricity kingdom, the Light altar was much more simplistic. It was a wooden structure of 20 meters by 10. It could have been mistaken with a dojo. A small wooden staircase led to a sliding door.

Followed by the others, Misty headed there and opened it. Inside, some candles were lighting the place. It was only one big room with an altar at the center.

Seating on the oratory, a little girl wearing white was swinging her legs in rhythm with her head going left to right, like she was listening to some inaudible music. Her platinum blond hair were tied under a white cap and followed her movements. She looked like a maid. Marle offered her usual display of politeness.

“Misty, I presume. I am Glisten, goddess of light.”

“We’re here to activate the last seal,” explained Tom

“I know, Jolt told me you would come. He also shared his concern with me. It saddens me that I am your last choice. I would have loved to challenge you with my element, but the last trial is universal and, whatever the order the god in training complete the seals, the eighth trial will always be the same. Are you sure to be ready for the last hurdle? If you say yes, you won't be able to back down. The specifics of the trial will be revealed once you accept.”

“It’s rather risky. What would happen if the trial is to kill all of you?” asked Misty. I can’t kill a stranger so how could I even harm any of you?”

“Do not worry,” said Glisten. “It has nothing to do with your guardians and as a counterpart, your eighth seal will unlock when you accept the challenge.”

“Come on, do it, say yes,” pushed Chronexia.

“It will be alright,” said Tom.

He wouldn’t let her down now that they were so close to the end. He would help her become a real goddess.

“Alright,” said Misty.

“Are you sure?” asked Glisten. “Well, okay! We warned you.”

Glisten made Misty’s second half appear. Before her, Chronexia materialized for the first time. She looked exactly like Misty. Chronexia

untied her hair so that they could be distinguished and stored her hairbands in her pocket under her copies of the boomerangs.

“Do you want to explain the last trial to her?” asked Glisten to Chronexia.

She nodded. After sharing a body for so long, she had to be the one announcing it. Misty started to feel something inside her: she slowly started to regret her decision.

“The last trial is a fight,” said Chronexia. “One against one. You will have to fight me, win and kill me. If you can’t, I will do so and take control of you body for good. Neither Tom nor anybody else in that room will be allowed to interfere. Not even Glisten.”

“The best at controlling their attributed element will become a goddess,” explained Glisten.

“I am sorry Misty, but I told you at the Electricity kingdom. There is no way that I'll lose, not when I went that far. This time, Tom won’t be able to keep his promise.”

“No!” screamed Tom. “Cancel the deal!”

An invisible force pushed the group to the back of the room and an invisible wall appeared between them and the fighters. A wall that nobody could go through.

“Misty!” yelled Tom.

“It’s too late, Tom. I already accepted,” grieved Misty. “But I thought that a god’s powers were locked when they were in another god’s domain?”

“The last trial of a god in training is the only exception to that rule,” said Glisten. “Goddess against goddess, you will fight until one of you fall.”

“I know what you’re thinking about,” said Chronexia. “It won’t be of any use. You won’t be able to tire me out. You can barely heal Tom when it’s one of the basic tricks. You rushed to unlock all the seals in a month, one after the other without training in-between them. Your body isn’t used to these changes. All the times you vomited are proof of this.”

Tom rushed toward the invisible wall and punched it, but it absorbed the blow then pushed him away. Tom stood up instantly and slammed it with his shoulder. Once again, he bounced against the wall. His gray aura started to appear.

"Tom!" called Misty. "I'm sorry but this time we will reverse the roles."

Misty talked without looking at him. She couldn't face him while she was about to die for him.

"You think that love is putting your life on the line for the one you hold dear?" she continued. "No. Love is letting that person put their life at stake for you multiple times and look at them go without being able to intervene. I never had the chance to tell you and maybe I never will again, so…"

Misty turned her head toward Tom and plunged her green eyes in his brown ones.

"I love you, Tom. I always did."

Misty's Fae burst out. Her power increased extremely. Was that the real strength of a goddess? Then Misty talked to Chronexia.

"It's true that you are the best, but I won't let you win. You can completely control time and I know almost nothing about it, but I still have my boomerangs."

"We are both goddesses now. We can't die from physical wounds anymore. The only way you could win is to empty my energy, but it won't happen."

"We'll see!"

Misty threw her two boomerangs in a crisscross pattern. To prove her point Chronexia didn't even try to dodge them. Both weapon cut her skin: one on the neck and one between two ribs. Instead of blood, a pink liquid was dripping. Misty caught her boomerangs while breathing heavily. Did her throw took that much energy out of her? It's true that she didn't train much

recently.

"You see?" taunted Chronexia.

Misty ignored her and threw her boomerangs again. Two new wounds appeared on her opponent's body: one on her left thigh and the other on her cheek. Misty grabbed her toys and her breath was even shorter. Strangely, so was Chronexia's.

"What are you doing?" she wondered.

"I guess that you noticed," yielded Misty. "You see my weapons? They are the ones that are the most helpful in my situation."

"Boomerangs? It's rather plain."

"As a goddess of time you seem to be pretty careless," said Misty.

She sheathed one of her blue weapons and lifted the second in front of her eyes. She changed the angle of the two wings a few times. Tom's gift for her previous birthday had that particularity. The angle at the center could be adjusted which would allow wider or sharper turns. For someone who knew nothing about the sport, it may have looked a bit ordinary, but what Misty said every time she changed the angle made Chronexia wan.

"Nine o'clock, ten fifteen o'clock, seven thirty o'clock, eight o'clock," said Misty after every move.

"A clock?" stammered Chronexia.

Misty nodded. Her opponent had understood, but she still explained the trick to her in order to buy some time and plan another throw.

"I threw them counter clockwise. What happen to a clock when its hands go backward? I attached my powers to my weapons. After all, I only know how to affect a body and how to go back in time. You said it yourself. I rushed the seals in one month, and after four throws I turned your state back to the fourth seal. A few more hits and you'll be back to before you woke up."

Misty threw her boomerangs. Chronexia lifted her arms and froze them in place.

"I've been careless," said Chronexia, annoyed.

She placed her palm over her heart and moved her age forward. She brought it back to right before the fight. All of Misty's efforts had been in vain. More than that, she had disadvantaged herself. Throwing her boomerangs like that drained a lot of her energy.

Her instinctive reflexes mixed with her panic troubled her mind. Disarmed, her only option was to attack Chronexia with her fists. Of course, her target dodged the assault by pausing the temporal flow, moving out of the way then resuming it.

With a kick, Chronexia pushed Misty back toward Tom and the invisible wall.

"I must confess that it was a rather smart plan, but you won't be able to use it again."

Misty stopped the time; if Chronexia had frozen her, she could do the same and go drain her energy while she wasn't moving. Chronexia stood still for about two seconds then started to move again.

"How!" exclaimed Misty, shocked.

"We are both able to control time. If you stop it, it doesn't affect me. My body freezes, but my mind is still conscious so I only have to change the frequency. You could have done the same when I froze you a few seconds ago. I'm sorry but you lost."

The flow of time resumed, leaving Misty laying on the floor with Chronexia above her.

"No!" yelled Tom with tears in his eyes.

He hit the wall in hope that it broke down and would let him through.

"Give up, Tom. It's useless," said Ryu.

"Let him be," replied Gab. "He's venting his frustration."

"Misty!" cried Noemi and Asuka.

"One last request?" asked Chronexia to her victim.

Misty hesitated. She couldn't ask her to switch places, it would be

ridiculous and she would refuse. Still, an idea dawned on her.

“Help Tom,” she said. “Help him and the others to save their parents.”

Chronexia nodded to seal their agreement. As soon as the trial had been revealed, Misty knew deep down that she wouldn’t win. She finally understood the feeling she experienced at the beginning of the fight: it was the fear of dying. Now she had to ask the fateful question.

“Are you going to kill me?” asked Misty.

“To be honest? I kind of like you, so no, I won't kill you…”

Misty and Tom shared a sigh of relief.

“You really scared me, you know,” began Misty.

“Although,” continued Chronexia, “I will seal you. Each gods have their own dimension where their power reign. Glisten has the Light altar, Jolt the Electricity kingdom and so on. We have the end of time. A place that not even the Boss can reach. You will be locked there. You will be able to use your powers as you wish, but you won’t be able to leave that dimension, even if I die.

“It’s even worse than death,” whispered Ryu to himself. “She will be alone, trapped forever and immortal.”

“Misty!” shouted Tom.

“I’m sorry, Tom. I did my best, I swear. Go save your parents. Do it for me and don't blame Chronexia.”

“No!” insisted Tom.

He took out his hazblades and transformed them. He stabbed the two tips in the invisible wall and tried to create a way unsuccessfully. In the room, his gray Fae had burst out and was sweeping the air like a gigantic turbine. He had reached sixty thousand manas.

“I never took the time to thank you for everything you did for me. Especially you, Tom. Thanks from the bottom of my heart.”

Chronexia laid her hand on Misty and she disappeared in a cloud of

stardust.

“MISTY!”

The trial was over. The invisible wall was gone. Tom took this opportunity. He was filled with a white rage. As much as he was in love with Misty, this pale copy disgusted him. It was the first time he wanted to hurt the red haired girl. Tom let go of his hazblades and ran toward Chronexia. He clenched his fists. Without holding back, he was about to hit her.

Chronexia lifted her hand to stop time, but Tom was still rushing toward her. In a panic, she turned to Glisten.

“The trial is over. The territorial delimitation is back in effect. Here, you're a human.”

“Free Misty!” ordered Tom.

He punched Chronexia violently on the cheek. With the Ixcross’ power, Misty’s body was projected against the back wall. The wood splintered and Chronexia rolled in the dirt. By exiting the dojo, she had regained her goddess status. Tom ran after her through the hole he had just created. Behind, Gab and Nark rushed to hold him back, but Chronexia already took care of him. He was frozen in place but still conscious. He wasn't fighting back anymore.

“Bring her back to me,” he cried.

“I can’t,” cut Chronexia. “There can only be one god per domain. The other must disappear. You should be happy, she’s still alive.”

“Then send me where she is!”

“That's also impossible. No human can enter this dimension. If even the boss cannot access it, how do you think a mere human could?”

“What do I have to do?” he sobbed.

Chronexia unfroze him. Tom fell on his knees. Nark approached him and crouched on his left. Gab laid a hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

“You made a promise to Misty,” said Nark. “And like she said, Misty isn’t dead. We'll find a way to bring her back.”

“It’s true,” added Gab.

In front of Tom, someone dug his hazblades into the ground. Ryu was standing there, with Noemi by his side.

“What a sad display you’re offering us,” he said. “You think you can win with that attitude? Don't let her sacrifice be in vain.”

“Tom,” whispered Noemi. “Too many people disappeared because of us. Let’s go get our parents then go back home.”

Tom nodded silently. Behind him, Marle was comforting Asuka as best as she could. That’s when they noticed the flying structure. It had gotten closer during Misty’s fight.

“How are we going to get there?” asked Nark.

“I can teleport us, but I can only do it in front of the entrance,” explained Noemi. “If I try to get us inside and we could appear into a wall, and die.”

“The entrance will be fine,” confirmed Gab.

“Do not forget,” added Chronexia. “I may be a goddess but I am not your friend. I’m here to free the prisoners. I do not intend on baby-sitting you or save you if you are in trouble. Once I’m done with my duty, I’m leaving. Is that clear?”

Everyone in the group nodded to let her know they understood. This goddess was just a useless weight added to their team. They couldn’t count on her powers. If Misty had won she would have helped them with all of her might. But this insensitive and selfish goddess had only one goal: to get rid of this annoying task.

Tom grabbed his hazblades and sheathed them. He was ready. For Misty, he would go save his parents and then he would challenge Chronexia. This world was of no interest to him if Misty wasn’t in it.

Noemi gathered the team inside a small imaginary pen. She positioned herself in the center, lifted her staff and slowly they started to fade. Tom loved the feeling. His worries disappeared thanks to his aunt’s

magic. It didn't last long. The second after, he felt the world's weight on his shoulders again.

Their surroundings were different, but Tom expected it. Before them, the stone structure was standing proud. It was nothing like the castle they had fought Vince and his sidekicks. This one was twenty or thirty times bigger. A child's tale castle. Night was upon them. Tom estimated that it was about ten.

"We're invading our enemy's territory," said Asuka. "It's my field of expertise. We will have to be fast and discreet."

"Tell me, Chronexia," asked Gab. "Since you control time, do you know what we will face inside?"

"Yes. I also know the identity of that master you are seeking. Of course, don't count on me to reveal it. It's funnier if I don't spoil it. Right, Tom?"

"Go to hell," he replied.

Tom went up the first steps and entered the castle. The remaining of the team followed. The first room they saw was rather ordinary. On each sides were flights of stair leading to upper and lower floors. Although the basement seemed logical when thinking about were they would lock their prisoners, Tom shook his head when Ryu asked him if they should venture there.

"Everything is on this floor," said Chronexia. In front of Gab's intrigued look, she added "I'm not helping you. It's just that I dislike to waste my time over nothing."

In front of them was another small staircase. Like before, Tom went up first and the others followed. They had agreed that splitting up was a bad idea.

On top of the stairs was an arch that led to a gigantic room. The ceiling was almost invisible because of its height. The place was as big as the Electricity kingdom. How could a castle that big float into Mana's

atmosphere?

“Oh oh!” said Gab. “I was expecting the place to be inhabited, but I didn’t that type of crowd.”

Gab pointed at the left side of the room. Between the floor and the ceiling was a 50 meters high dragon. Black as darkness, the animal gave a roar that shook walls. Dust fell on their feet. Ryu’s interest was piqued.

“It’s smart!” said Ryu. “Of course. It’s trying to separate us. It knows that Noemi and I catch dragons. It wants to keep us busy and isolate us from the group. This monster will not let us through.”

“What should we do?” asked Tom, grinding his teeth.

“We don’t have a choice but to play it’s game,” admitted Ryu. “But I will add an unexpected twist to it.”

“Which one?” asked Asuka.

“Noemi,” continued Ryu. “You'll go with them.”

“What?” she wondered. “But we're a team!”

“Exactly. The master expect you to stay with me to fight it. We have to be smarter. Also I can’t deprive the team's only healer and keep her for myself. Go forward, I'll take care of that dragon alone. Gab, make her follow if you need to. Go, now!”

Ryu grabbed his bow and a few arrows while turning around. He drew one and aimed at the monster that was still approaching.

Behind him, Chronexia had already ran to the next room. Marle, Gab and Nark were about to follow her. They dragged Noemi and Asuka with them. Nobody wanted to abandon Ryu in such a dangerous situation, but they needed to move forward.

Ryu was unable to beat the fire dragon that was 10 meters smaller than this one. Noemi had to do it for him. He knew it, but he couldn’t let her deal with this one as well. While she was unconscious, Ryu went through her documentation. The serum she injected herself with made her extremely powerful, but removed 10 years of her life for every minute of use. Being a

half-elf, she would live a lot longer than any human could, but she had lost 30 years the last time she used it.

“I won’t make it out alive this time,” said Ryu to himself.

“Then let me help,” replied Tom. “I don’t want to sacrifice anybody.”

Tom was by his side, hazblades transformed, ready to take on the dragon. Ryu hadn’t seen him. He turned his head toward him, gave a thin amused smile then focused on the black dragon again.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I won't keep my human form. You'll be in my way. Just swear that you will see this through and that you'll protect Noemi. She's stronger than you guys give her credits for.”

Ryu didn’t let Tom reply. His skin slowly started to change. After killing the fire dragon, thanks to Noemi, Ryu had absorbed him like the ice and earth ones. He only needed a few seconds to complete his transformation.

Before Tom had time to examine him, a tail sweep lifted him off the ground and threw him through the exit the other members of the group had taken. Tom crashed into the stone wall and fell on the floor. With one scratch of his claws, Ryu caused a landslide from the top of the arch which blocked the way. Now, nobody could come back to interrupt his fight.

Tom coughed. The landslide didn’t hurt him, but the dust was preventing him from breathing. Gab helped him up.

“Come on, let’s go!” Gab hurried him. “All the others are already in the next room. He will be alright. It’s his specialty.”

“Yes, you’re right,” said Tom, skeptical.

Tom turned around and followed Gab through the small corridor leading to the next room. What if Ryu was right? What would happen if the master had planned to kill off his companions one after the other? His premonitory dreams had always made sure that he knew that. But why would his friends give up on him? Unless they were killed before that? He had to be careful. He had to make sure that the six remaining persons would be with

him until the end. But for now, he had to catch up with them!

Behind the landslide, Ryu had regained his human form. He couldn't keep his dragon form for more than a minute and worse, he had dealt almost no damage to the beast. Ryu sighed.

"That was easier than I thought, see you later Tom..."

***

Tom entered the new room. In front of him, Marle and the small brat with the fire mane were fighting. He was one of the generals he saw at Hyrtol. Once she saw his mocking face, Marle, surrounded by her purple Fae, had rushed towards the thug.

"It'll be alright," said Nark. "I saw her fight. She's incredibly strong and, since she's half a goddess, she's immortal like Chronexia."

"Let's move on," said Gab.

He had stopped so that Asuka would follow him. How could she abandon her friend with that general after leaving her brother and losing Misty? Asuka took out her cards and Tom grabbed his hazblades. Both charged Denver, but Marle lifted her arms to block their way.

Her usual affable expression had left her face. She gritted her teeth. Marle shook her head left to right before pointing at Denver then at herself. Nark translated.

"Her fight was interrupted in Hyrtol. She surely wants to finish it."

Marle confirmed with a violent nod. With her free hand, she showed the exit to the next room.

"That's not the time to be selfish," scolded Tom. "We have to stick together!"

"Don't insist Tom," explained Gab. "When you were fighting Vince, you were also rejecting everyone's help. It's the exact same situation. Marle wants to help us her own way."

"Argh!" exclaimed Tom. "Alright, but I forbid you to die. Swear that you will be alright."

Marle looked at him and smiled. She tilted her head and closed her eyes. She raised a thumb to show her agreement. To force them to leave, Marle swept her hand toward the next door.

At the back of the room, Denver was still laughing diabolically. Tom left first. He was about to go through the door but stopped abruptly. Behind him, Asuka stopped to. The whole group slowed down.

“No,” said Tom. We won’t leave her. She wants her fight? Very well, but we will wait here until she’s done. I refuse to sacrifice you one after the other. If we have to wait in every room to satisfy everyone’s whim, then so be it. If you don’t like it, then go. I’ll catch up with you.”

“Yes, let’s support her,” agreed Nark. “After all, she’s been my sparing partner.”

Asuka approved. Only Noemi stayed silent. She was jealous. Why would they stay for Marle after giving up on Ryu? They had forced her to continue and now they were waiting for that half-goddess. She couldn’t bear it. It was unfair.

“Miss Chronexia?” asked Noemi politely. “Could you please send me to the previous room?”

“Oh you are so sweet and well behaved,” said Chronexia, touched. “But I warned you that I wouldn’t do anything more than my duty. Can’t you go by yourself?”

“No. If I teleport into something solid, I’ll die. And time flies by when I teleport. I would reappear one hour later. Thanks anyway.”

The fight between Denver and Marle had begun some time ago. To go against Marle’s mace, the general was holding a sharp trident in his tiny hands. Both were animated by an impressive strength. Who would wear the other one out?

Marle slung her mace behind her then swung it at the brat. Denver blocked it by sticking his trident in the center of the mace. The impact sound echoed against the room’s walls. Marle was startled: it wasn’t a common

sound.

The general's smile widened so much that his cheeks tore. Everybody shivered, but Tom was the first to understand. He charged at Denver. Marle interposed herself between them. She grabbed Tom's shoulders without even looking at him. The general's trident dug so deep in her back that it exited through her chest. Even with Marle's protection, the tines scratched the swordsman's torso.

Tom was frozen in place. Marle's blood mixed with his.

"Marle," articulated Tom.

She lifted her head toward him. Her forehead was covered in sweat. Her breath was short. Usually, a human impaled like that would have died right away, but she was still holding. Between two breaths, she moved a wet strand of hair from his forehead. She stroked his cheek with her hand and kissed his forehead where his hair used to be. On her lips, Tom read the silent words *thank you*.

"No! Marle!" he protested.

Why was he the only one to understand their situation? He didn't have time to explain to the others. As Mana had explained to them, Marle wasn't immortal. The mace was cracked from the impact with the trident. If her weapon broke, Marle would disappear. If blood was flowing out of her body, it was because the link between Pearle and Mana had weakened. She was killing herself. Marle was taking her own life to allow them to move forward.

Her weapon's handle still in her hand, Marle turned around, the trident piercing her heart. With all her might she smacked her weapon on Denver. The mace shattered like glass. The general was lifted off his feet and landed in a corner, dead.

Marle's fingers slowly let go of her weapon's handle. It rang on the floor once, bounced against the other side and did so until it stopped moving. Marle stumbled and fell slowly toward the stone floor. Tom caught her before

she hit the ground. There were tears on his cheeks. In the room, Nark, dumbfounded, explained what Tom understood ages ago. Asuka collapsed. Her eyes were filled with sadness.

“No,” she whispered.

Marle’s eyes closed slowly. She fluttered her lashes one last time to print the image of Tom looking at her in her memories then she smiled. Her eyelids closed and her head leaned on the side, lifeless. Her last Marlian smile had blessed Tom.

“Come on, let’s go,” hurried Chronexia. “It’s useless to waste time here.”

Tom didn’t even get the courage to be angry at her. If he did, it would be like spitting on Marle’s sacrifice. She died in his arms. Tom grabbed the trident.

“I am so sorry. It’s all my fault,” he told her lifeless corpse.

Tom teared the golden object from her body and threw it away. A splash of blood came out of Marle’s back. Tom laid her on the floor and was under the vague impression that her smile looked even more angelic than before. In her open hand, he left her broken mace’s handle. He closed her fingers on it and let the stick rest against her cheek. From his bag, he took a thin blanket that he covered her body with. The white sheet slowly started to turn red.

“What do we do now?” asked Nark, shocked.

“I'll go on, but before, I request that you all leave,” answered Tom. “I swore to Misty that I will see this through, and I will, but I don’t want your sacrifices to be the price to pay.”

Chronexia giggled.

“How could they leave? The way out was blocked by your now dead companion a bit earlier,” Chronexia lied. “And even if…”

“Ryu's dead?” squealed Noemi.

“Oh, oops!” said Chronexia with a fake dazed look.

Noemi's eyes filled with tears.

"No!" she fought back. "Ryu cannot die! It's a lie. He… he's all I have left."

Noemi ran toward the next room. Backtracking would uselessly take her back to the landslide. She would go through the doors until she found stairs that would lead her back down to the entrance. She shouldn't have abandoned him like she did.

"Noemi!" screamed Tom. "Wait!"

He ran after her. Nark and Chronexia followed but Asuka didn't move. Gab approached her.

"I'm sorry for your brother. And Marle," he added. "And… Misty."

"I'm scared," she promptly said.

Gab remained silent. Asuka fell on her knees. She was feeling so weak.

"Everyone that I hold dear disappears. First my parents, then my two best friends and my brother in less than 24 hours. How can I explain to them that Ryu died because of me? And I'm scared for you."

"For me?" wondered gab.

"You are very important to me," she admitted without looking at him. "And I'm scared to attach myself to you because you will also disappear!"

Asuka started crying, Gab sat in front of her and placed a hand on her head to reassure her. An idea popped in his head. He searched through his pockets and grabbed a small talisman hanging on a silver necklace. He attached it around her neck.

"What is it?"

"A small gift. It's the card you used in the Coliseum and that saved your life. I got it back and asked a friend of mine to improve it. Now, you'll be able to use it so that nothing happens to me."

"Thank you," she stammered.

“Tell me, Asuka. I need you to do something for me. You already drew cards for me once. Could you do it again to predict our deaths? We might avoid them.”

“I never tried and I don’t think that it would work.”

Gab urged her to try anyway. After a few shuffles, Asuka chose the fire and water card.

“What does that mean?” asked Gab. “Wet fire? Whatever, thanks for trying. We should catch up with the others. I would feel guilty if someone else dies.”

“Yes, let’s make sure it doesn’t happen.”

Gab helped her up. Asuka was about to leave when she looked at the reddened sheet covering Marle’s body. Gab wrapped her in his arms and she cried openly.

***

Noemi had just arrived in the next room. It was different from the ones before. The floor was made of worn out wood and stone column were decorating the room here and there. The ceiling was six meters high and in the corners were steel spider webs. Their owner was crushed a few steps away from her.

An enormous three meters metal tarantula was resting in one of the corners next to the exit. An acrid smoke was coming out the machine’s smashed cranium. It was definitely the trap waiting for them in this room if it hadn’t already been put out of use.

In front of Noemi was a 20 years old woman. She had silver hair tied in puffy pigtails, steel gray eyes and a silver and black outfit. She was holding a titanium scepter in her fingers. She was standing proud despite some worrying wounds. Did the broken machine caused them?

“You are…” started Noemi.

“Me,” smiled the woman.

“Noemi!” called Tom.

He had just reached the room and was studying it as fast as he could. This woman in front of Noemi looked exactly like her.

“Tom!” said the older one, diabolically.

She rushed toward him immediately. She was bout to hit him with her staff. Tom blocked the blow instinctively with his hazblades.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“You have to die, Tom!” she raged.

“Απώθηση!” screamed Noemi.

The woman barely had time to turn her head toward her. She was stubbed by an invisible energy wave that rammed her into the closest wall. She got out of it a few moments later. Her green Fae was surrounding her.

“Oh yes! I forgot about that part.”

The aura around her burst like nothing he ever saw before. Her power reached a hundred and twenty thousand manas. Her Fae turned emerald green.

“Tom has to die!” she screamed.

“*She’s the master!*” thought Tom.

“I won't let you hurt my friend!” replied Noemi.

She opened a fold of her jacket and grabbed a syringe filled with a jade liquid. From her pocket, Noemi took a pill that she catapulted in her mouth with her thumb. She bit in it and stuck the syringe in her neck. The two powers balanced-out.

“Επέκταση!” commanded Noemi.

“Tsk,” said the older one.

Noemi’s weapon lengthened. The room’s size wouldn’t allow her to use the same tactic as the one she used against the fire dragon. With all her might, Noemi swung her weapon through the room. The metal bar hit a stone pillar but cut through it like it was made of paper. It then hit the older half-elf but she simply caught it in her hand afterward.

“Apocalypse Epsilon!” called Noemi.

“Apocalypse Lambda!” replied the other right away.

Tom was in the line of fire. The attacks collided then absorbed each others and pushed back the three persons in the room. That’s when Nark, Chronexia, Asuka and Gab entered the room. Tom flew up, hit the corner of a pillar and bounced against a nearby wall. He shouted out of pain.

Noemi, stunned by the attack, got sent against a pillar that cracked under the impact. The older one flew in the opposite direction, extending her arm toward Noemi. She hit her head against a wall and passed out. This commotion would handicap her for the hour to come.

Noemi, laying on her belly, coughed. She tried to stand back up by using her forearms. Blood was flowing from her temples and the corner of her lips. This medicine was destroying her life. She had to cancel its effects. A cracking sound next to her caught her attention.

“Noemi!” screamed Tom.

The gigantic stone pillar started to shake above her head and started to fall in her direction. She didn’t have the time to move out of its way.

“Ryu,” she whispered.

The heavy stones fell on the half-elf in a blood curdling sound. Tom’s mouth twitched agape. The pillar had crushed Noemi like a squished cockroach. Tom couldn’t even blink. Like all the others, he was traumatized by what had just happened. They tried to say her name, but no sound would come out of their mouths. At the back of the room, Noemi’s older copy faded away in a cloud of stardust. As the temporal continuum law wants it, if Noemi from the present died, the older one couldn’t exist.

Chronexia was the first one to stammer something.

“How horrible!” she swore. “That’s super gore.”

Asuka’s knees went weak. She collapsed and blood drained from her face. Gab shook his head. His aunt had just die in front of him, just because they lagged behind. They had to stay together! Gab crouched next to Asuka.

“I’m going to be sick,” she confided.

"Come on, stand up," he said. "Walking will do you some good."

That wasn't the real reason, but they had to leave this room. The ambiance was too morbid. Tom started to yell. Both Apocalypse spells had caused cuts on a great part of his body. He could still walk but his clothes were completely stained with blood. Despite all of his wounds, pain had nothing to do with Tom's scream.

"It's my fault! Noemi died because I didn't act quickly enough!"

Nark crouched next to him and slapped his face with the back of his hand.

"Stop spewing nonsense. It's just an awful incident. Get yourself together."

"And what will happen if we reach the end and there's nothing! Nobody to save! All those sacrifices will have been for nothing!"

"Tom!" scolded Nark. "Remember why we're doing this. We came to save everybody. Collateral damages are unavoidable, but you made promises and you have to keep them. If you died, would you like us to turn tail and go home, making your sacrifice void?"

"No," begrudgingly admitted Tom after a moment.

"Then are their sacrifice expandable?"

"No," insisted Tom sadly.

Nark smiled.

"Then stand up and let's reach the end you and I."

"We're still alive, princess," taunted Gab.

"Yeah, let's hope it lasts," replied Nark sadly. "Let's stay together from now on."

Tom nodded. Nark helped him up and they headed toward the exit. Nobody turned around to look at the rubble covering Noemi's body: it would only slow them down again.

They were only five now. Gab helped Asuka walk since she was stumbling at every steps. With no warning, she vomited violently. Gab looked

away. She had told him. The group stopped until she felt a bit better. Her head was spinning. After a few minutes, Asuka forced herself to move forward. Nark followed Tom and Chronexia was bringing up the rear, her arms crossed behind her head.

“You won’t like the next room,” she warned them.

“Will you shut up!” ordered Tom.

Chronexia shrugged. That wasn’t her problem after all.

The fourth room seemed disappointing at first glance: four walls, empty, a locked door leading to an upper floor and an arch leading to a subsection made of glass walls. At the back of it was a digital print reader in the shape of a hand. Instructions were carved on the side of the arch.

To move onward, someone must place their hand against the print reader.

Chronexia sighed. For the first time, she felt pity for them. They all knew there was a trap hidden in there, but she decided to explain what it was to spare them the surprise.

“As soon as someone touches the mechanism, the exit door will open, but another door will trap that person inside. Then, slowly, water will fill that room.”

“So the one opening the door will drown?” summarized Gab.

Chronexia nodded then continued before Tom could say anything.

“No I won't do it. I promised Misty to reach the end of this and even if I can’t drown, I don’t want to remain stuck here while you're all having fun. You'll have to choose one out of the four of you. I got all the time in the world.”

Tom grunted.

“What if we send someone to activate the mechanism while someone else is holding the door?”

“Also useless,” assured Chronexia. “The exit door will not open as long as the other one isn’t sealed. Choose your next corpse.”

Tom gathered with Asuka, Nark and Gab.

“There is no way to get around that mechanism,” worried Nark. “It’s foolproof and none of our abilities will help us cheat. If only Noemi was still here…”

Nark didn’t finish his sentence. It was useless to ponder the impossible. They had to find a volunteer. Chronexia refused to go so there group of four would be reduced again.

“I’m scared,” admitted Asuka. I… I don’t want to die.”

“Don’t worry,” reassured Gab. “We won't ask you to go. It’s between the three of us.”

“No!” she objected. “I beg you, stay with me. I don’t want to lose you like all the others.”

“It’s alright, I see where this is going,” lashed out Nark. “I have to sacrifice myself?”

“No,” cut Tom. “I will. Drowning seems to be the least violent death up to now. And I can’t play this game anymore. I’m not strong enough to see you die one after the other.”

“No way,” replied Gab. “I will not let you commit suicide like that. You swore to Misty that you will continue until the end.”

“This is the end Gab! Collateral damages are unavoidable, right? Why should I be the only one to reach the end? No. I refuse to be the only one privileged in this situation, especially after…”

A mechanical hiss rung behind Tom. He turned around in the middle of his sentence. Nark had sneaked behind him. He had removed his glove and pressed his palm against the mechanism. Through the bay window, he saw Nark wink at him.

Tears welled up in Tom’s eyes. Without hesitation, he threw himself against the thick glass and hit it with his fists.

“No! You can’t do this! It’s my spot! You stole my spot!” protested Tom, in tears.

Nark smiled at him, amused. Behind them, the exit door unlocked and water started to fill the glass room. Nark waved at them in a friendly way to say good bye.

“You swore we would reach the end together! You lied to me! You're a LIAR!”

Tom, bawling, collapsed out of exhaustion. Gab felt a shiver of respect for his rival. He nodded as a thank you for his sacrifice. Nark smiled and gave him a thumb-up. Through the thick door that was locking him inside, Nark screamed:

“Go! I don’t want you to watch me die!”

Gab nodded again. It was a last request they could grant him. Water had risen to his waist. Gab helped Tom up and dragged him through the door against his will.

“THANK YOU, NARK!” Tom yelled. “Thank you for everything!”

Nark’s smile widened. He had a lot of fun with him, but now the curtain was falling, it was time to go.

“Reach the end, Tom. I know you will…”

***

The remaining four walked up the stairs for 30 minutes after Nark’s death. Nobody talked. They had nothing to say and Chronexia’s commentaries were constantly ignored. After a break imposed by Asuka, they started ascending the stairs again. It ended when they reached two ancient-styled, three meters high doors.

Gab, in front of the group, opened them delicately. In front of them was the next trap. Asuka swallowed with difficulty. Shaking, she put her fingers on her card deck and grabbed the first two. She looked at them intently. The cards of fire and water.

“It wasn’t wet fire,” she whimpered. “It was liquid fire.”

Behind the two doors was a gigantic room. Dozens of beams fitted into one another were forming a grotesque and narrow path multiple meters

above a lava lake.

Asuka felt dizzy. Her knees bent and she collapsed on the floor and tried to catch her breath. She looked at Gab. The half-demon's eyelids were slightly closed, as he was analyzing the situation.

"This is where I die," he determined.

Chapter 17:
Three, Two, One… Action

Tom was sitting against the metallic door frame. He was taking deep breath to calm down. On his right, Asuka started to hyperventilate. Their minds were going haywire. Tom was plagued by remorse and guilt. He had left Ryu behind. Marle acted as a shield for him. Noemi was crushed by a pillar and Nark sacrificed himself so that they could go on.

Asuka was shaking from fear and sadness. Her friends were dying one after the other so it was only a matter of time before their group would be down another member. Since they knew each other, they had many near death experiences, Tom more than the others, but they had always escaped unscathed. Now their lives was slipping through their fingers like Chronexia's sand.

Asuka started to breathe faster. Tears were streaming down her face and black dots started to obscure her vision. She was about to faint and Gab noticed it.

"Tom, do you have a paper bag and a bottle of water?"

"Yes," he answered after a while.

"Give them to me."

Tom opened his backpack and took out a paper bag containing their perishable food and a bottle of cold water. He gave them to the half-demon. Gab held the bag against Asuka's mouth and nose and ordered her to breathe at a steady pace. Then, he slowly poured the water on her head. The liquid mixed with her sweat and flowed between her eyes and on her neck. She didn't struggle. The feeling was rather pleasant. After a few minutes, she calmed down.

“And you, are you ok, Tom?” asked Gab.

“As well as someone who just killed four of his friends against his will can be.”

“You are such a downer!” said Chronexia.

“You shouldn’t feel like that,” replied Gab to his brother. “You should feel rage. Aren’t you mad at this master for killing them? Use your sadness to fuel your anger and then we'll find a solution. We have the goddess of time with us. That will certainly be of use to us. You wanted to challenge her, right? There's still hope.”

“Yes,” admitted Tom.

“Sure, you are free to believe that,” giggled Chronexia. “A mere human can’t defeat a god.”

Once again, they ignored her. Tom moved closer to Gab who was looking at their next destination. That room opening on a lava and stone world didn’t inspire any confidence in them. The exit was in plain sight, the issue was getting there. The 50 meters long beams seemed worn out by time. The path twisted and turned on itself. It was only toward its end that it became large enough to be remotely safe.

Gab removed his tail from his outfit. It would be necessary to help him keep his balance on the thinner parts, but he wasn’t worried about himself. If Tom was slow and careful, crossing this inferno would go without a hitch. Chronexia wasn’t an issue either. If she lost her footing, she could rewind time. But what could they do about Asuka? If she stayed behind, she would be all alone and she didn’t want that.

“Can’t you carry her on your back or in your arms?” asked Tom.

“No. I may be half a cat, but I'll need all my mobility. Also, I’m supposed to die here and I don’t want to take her down along with me.”

“Be very careful,” said Tom. “I lost my parents, my girlfriend and my friends. I’d like to keep my brother.”

Gab nodded with confidence. He looked at Asuka once more: she was

focusing and she nodded too. She was patting her cheeks to get some colors back before standing up.

“I’ll be alright,” reassured Asuka. “I still have my departure and arrival cards. If I slip, I will teleport and try again.”

“We will be with you, don't worry,” said Gab.

Instinctively, Tom rested his hands on his hazblades. They were always there in case of need. Worst case scenario, these two friends would keep him company until the end.

Chronexia was the first one to go. She balanced one foot on the beam and put the other one in front. She then gained momentum, ran, put her hands on the ground and rolled her feet in the air. She landed them on the other side of her hands and without losing any speed, tipped backward, pressed her fingers against the beam and propelled herself up high. She spiraled in the air and landed further away with perfect balance.

“It’s not so hard, you see?” she said.

“How many times did you start over?” asked Tom, not very impressed.

“I didn’t,” she lied. “I’m a natural.”

Asuka sighed, amazed. She had a hard time putting one foot in front of the other without faltering. In front of her, Gab was walking backward while holding one of her hands. With the other, she held her departure card firmly. He forced her to look at him in the eyes to prevent her from looking at the lava. They were progressing slowly but they didn’t block anybody’s way.

Chronexia, first in line, had ran through the three quarters of the beam maze. Tom was trying to remain at equal distance between them. Being able to act quickly in case of a fall was somehow putting his mind at ease.

Chronexia had already reached the other side for a few minutes when Asuka reached the halfway point. Tom reached the three meters wide segment near the end. He sighed, reassured, but it wasn’t over. For good measure, he tried to cheer for Asuka.

"Keep going! You are almost there!"

A few seconds went by and the entire room started to shake. Gab grabbed Asuka by the shoulder so that the earthquake wouldn't make her fall. A gigantic monster emerged from the lava pond. Chronexia ran back to where Tom was standing.

"What's this," panicked Tom.

The beast looked like a huge earthworm. Its greenish grey skin was spotted with molten lava. In its circular mouth, Tom could see millions of thin razor-sharp blade-like teeth. Its blinded left eye was crossed by long scar. The animal let out a strident roar and Tom covered his ears.

"It's a heat worm," explained Chronexia. Sandworms is what you call them if I'm not mistaken."

"No!" sighed Tom with panic.

"Usually, they live in the desert or other hot places. The higher the temperature, the bigger they become. They feed on heat and since humans are warm blooded mammals, you are like candy to them."

"Why come out now!" screamed Gab.

"Noise attracts them," replied Chronexia.

"Uh, oh!" said Asuka.

The giant worm roared again and shook in every directions. It folded on itself and hit Gab and Asuka. They let go of each others' hand and were propelled in opposite directions. Gab straightened up midair and balanced himself on a pillar further away. That was the advantage of having so many twists and turns on the way. The beams were creating some kind of widely spaced grid.

Asuka let the departure card slip from her fingers. The paper flew in the heat and caught fire before even touching the lava. Asuka bounced on a stone pillar and turned around in the air. She barely grabbed onto a beam, feet hanging 50 meters above the lava.

She yelled the whole time she was performing her stunt. The heat-

worm turned in her direction. The noise had caught its attention. On its left, Tom was raging, surrounded by his Fae of Will. He recognized that monster. It was the one he spared when Misty and he had been attacked in the desert. He had sliced its eye, but the animal escaped. The master probably captured it after that. It was the best guardian for that smoldering room. Now, Tom was paying the price for his mistake. He had to kill it before it reduced his team even more.

"Gab!" yelled Tom. "Help Asuka, I'm taking care of the worm!"

"Don't be ridiculous! This monster is more than a 100 meters long!"

"*I don't care,*" thought Tom.

The heat-worm charged at Tom who was waiting for it. Once it was close enough, Tom plunged to his right. His hazblades transformed during his dodge. While he recovered, he stabbed his blades at two different height in the monster's flesh. Tom looked straight ahead while the worm's blood was gushing everywhere.

The platform around Tom started to crack under the weight of its occupants. This pillars weren't that solid, they couldn't stay there much longer.

"Move Gab! I'm taking care of it!" he ordered. "Chronexia, leave!"

The goddess was startled but nodded and left by the same way she came back in. The rock was still cracking in every direction. Gab dashed away with one step of his heels. He had to take shortcuts to reach Asuka. He would have to be precise in order to jump and land exactly where he wanted.

The platform started to collapse. Tom jumped on the worm's back. He had to climb toward its head while avoiding the puddles of scorching liquid. While running, a drop of lava splashed on his left cheek. The heat was horrible. It dug in his skin while smoking. The volcanic rock dried quickly and stuck to his cheekbone. Tom instinctively closed his eye. He could still see but the terrible pain was paralyzing half of his face.

Tom crossed a furrow in the monster's flesh and kept on running. In

the distance, he could see Gab getting closer to Asuka who was still screaming in fear. The beast who had missed its first target turned toward them. Tom reached the top and stabbed is black hazblade in its other eye.

The same high-pitched scream resonated through the room. This time, Tom didn't bother with covering his ears. He removed his sword and the monster shook violently. Tom lost his balance and fell on a small, still standing part of the final platform. Chronexia tried to join him, but he ordered her firmly to stay where she was.

The heat-worm hit a pillar next to Asuka and broke it into tiny pieces. Slowly, the stone that Asuka was grabbing on to started to crumble. She started to cry. Gab arrived within reach of her voice.

"Leave," she said. "It's my death, not yours."

"What are you talking about? It was my card…"

"I drew the cards! It was my destiny we saw, not yours!"

"You're so dumb," insulted her Gab. "You did it on purpose."

Asuka kept on crying.

"I'm afraid to die!" she confided. "I'm afraid to suffer, to be forgotten."

"It won't happen," promised Gab. "I'm here to save you. I always did, right?"

"Ah, ah, ahhh," she cried.

Tears started to flow from Gab's eyes. The last beam he had to cross to reach her had just collapsed. The only pillar left was the one Asuka was feverishly grabbing on to but its base was starting to crumble.

"This is where I should be telling you to go and save yourself," she started between two sobs. "But I can't. I'm not as strong as all of you!"

The pillar finally broke down. Asuka started to fall. She didn't have any energy left to scream. Since she was about to die anyway, but if she had a choice, she would have liked the previous room better. Drowning sounded preferable to slowly melting in the flames.

A stream of red energy caught her. Gab had dived without thinking and caught her in his arms. He turned into the dancing heat, landed his feet on the heat-worm's body and propelled himself up high. He leaned against another pillar and jumped again. He managed to balance back on the remains of the beam that crumbled between her fingers. He had saved her…

The worm rammed into them again. Gab was thrown high in the air and he let go of Asuka. He barely grabbed her hand while gravity was bringing them back down to the fragmented rocks. With his free hand, Gab grabbed a pristine beam. He looked around.

The platform was too far away. He couldn't throw her there and lifting her on this beam would also be impossible. Right now, the rock was too fragile. A weight transfer would cause it to collapse and would drag them both down. There was only one solution…

"Let go of me," pleaded Asuka.

"You want to die now?" quipped Gab.

"No! But it's the only courageous thing I can do. I don't want to take you down with me."

"To give up is not courageous!" he said angrily. "Think! You own dozens of cards. Isn't there one that can help you?"

"It's only basic magic! I can't fly or become gigantic. I can only make stuff… appear."

She let go of his hand and started to fall.

"ASUKA!"

Gab was screaming in vain. Her road ended here. Falling wasn't that bad after all. The impact would be painful, but if she fell head first, the pain would only last a few seconds. She saw Gab growing smaller. Her vision was troubled by tears. She hated the smell of this room, this acrid smoke was making her head spin.

She finally hit the molten rocks. Despite the liquid's thickness, the speed of her fall caused her to be swallowed entirely under the surface. She

couldn't see Gab anymore. Only a red screen was covering her vision then everything became dark. She was right, the pain from the heat only lasted a few seconds. Her brain disconnected the feeling of pain.

Gab turned his head away. He couldn't look at the liquids waves. He refused to see her half burnt body resurface. She was gone. For the first time, Gab felt the same culpability as Tom, but it quickly turned into hatred.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a gray energy ark shaped like an X hit the worm and cut it. It was a more powerful version of the attack Tom had used against him in the Coliseum.

Gab grabbed the beam with his two hands and lifted himself back up. Behind him, the worm's remains collapsed in the abyss. Gab jumped toward Tom. He carefully landed on a cut pillar and jumped again toward the final platform. Tom and Chronexia waited for him outside. They saw what happened and didn't need any explanation.

"I'm sorry Gab," said Tom after a while. "Once again, it's my fault."

"You couldn't know."

Gab was trying to calm down. Tom was right, it was partially his fault for attracting the worm with his screams. And for sparing it in the desert. If he had killed it, Asuka would still be alive. But Gab was mad at himself for not finding a solution.

"If only I had…" began Tom.

"Shut up Tom!" raged Gab. "Just shut up!"

Tom complied sadly. Gab started walking again. Tom followed him and Chronexia closed the line. In front of them, more steps were leading up. They were already multiple kilometers up in the air and still had to climb. That was almost ridiculous.

Higher up, the corridor led them to an intersection. One of the paths was leading inside the castle while the other was leading to an outdoor bridge toward another tower. A sign was indicating which way led to the throne room and which led to Layroy's laboratory. Gab turned in that direction.

“Don’t go,” said Tom. “It’s a trap.”

“Ask me if I care,” replied Gab. “Come on, amuse me.”

Tom declined his offer. Layroy was the only reason he had followed him to this castle. If he had to lose his companions and risk his life, Gab would make sure to do what he had set out to beforehand.

“Meet with us when you’re done!” said Tom.

“Right, see you later,” replied Gab for himself.

Tom and Chronexia took the only other way when Gab left for the bridge. At first, Tom wanted them to stay together, but what was the point now? Every time he was with them, someone would die because of him. At least, if Gab was going somewhere else, he wouldn’t be in danger… Right?

Tom collapsed out of weakness. The adrenaline he felt while fighting the heat worm had just left his body. He was tired, he was shaking, and he had enough. Chronexia felt pity for him. She bent toward him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

The smell of Misty’s sweat reminded him of the numerous training session they had together. It clenched his heart. She helped him climb the last steps and they went through the first of the two doors to come.

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Gab didn’t have to go very far. As soon as he closed the door behind him, he was on the outdoor bridge. It was sturdy, but Asuka would have certainly hated being more than a 100 meters high in the air. Gab smiled nostalgically.

In the cloudless blue night, the moon was shedding its light on the bridge with ease. On the other side was his Nemesis. Gab would have already jumped on him if it wasn’t for the nine persons standing in his way.

Scattered near the bridge’s bulwarks and tiles were nine civilians among which he recognized Krissy, Maxime, Mack and Suling. He supposed the other five were Socrate, Aleck, Flora and his parents.

“These puppets are working for me and my master. If you want to kill

me, you will have to take care of them first," said Layroy.

"That would be rather counterproductive," admitted Gab. If I kill a puppet master and Tom takes care of the other one it should be enough to give them back their free will."

"Oh I didn't explain myself very well. My master simply ordered them to watch over me. I have no control on them. After all, I'm only a scientist."

"Great, less pressure on me."

Gab stretched his arm and grabbed his sword's handle that was sticking out behind his neck. He unsheathed it slowly. He had to make himself a way through the world's elite. For sure they were older now, but warriors were always dangerous, as old as they were.

Gab analyzed their position. The master's mental control didn't impair their motor skills. Trying to reason with them would be a waste of time and a stupid risk to take. Their first line was composed of hand to hand fighters: Mack, Achille and Aleck. A few meters behind them, Suling, Dyol and Socrate were their support. The two wizards were at the back. Krissy was acting as their bodyguard so that they would have all the time they need to cast their spell.

Gab only had two solutions: he could either make them all unconscious and take care of Layroy or he could fight them as hard as he could and spare Flora so that she could heal them. His best bet was to eliminate Layroy and hold on until Tom did what he had to.

"Offensive it is then," concluded Gab.

His Fae of Perseverance burst to thirty thousand manas. It was a good start. If he wanted to get rid of Layroy, he couldn't waste too much time with the elite. He had to cross that bridge and break their formation.

Gab placed his sword's hilt near his hip and spun on himself. Toward the end of his move, he suddenly turned his wrist. Part of his Fae separated from his body and rushed toward the first line. The attack was horizontal. To

dodge it, Mack, Achille and Aleck would have to jump. By adding the wrist movement to it, the attack trajectory changed. It turned on itself and separated the group in the center and middle. The energy turned diagonally and was closing in on Krissy at full speed. She crashed on the ground to protect herself.

All the way back at the end of the bridge, Layroy didn't say a thing. He thought that this team was pathetic. Way to put on a such a display for a miserable light show. With his claws, Layroy cut the energy vertically and the luminous arc faded. Gab had disappeared.

A steel blade entered through Layroy's collarbone and brutally exited through his thorax. He choked on the spray of blood he spat.

Gab had continued his attack. He went under the first line then through the center of the second and finally, he jumped. He made sure not to miss his target when he landed and he didn't. This army of the world had inflated Layroy's ego and he had been careless. But the master had stolen everything from Gab, even Asuka. She was more important to him than he would have thought possible. The half-demon shook his head. He had to finish Layroy before Flora healed him and then hold on until Tom…

A dagger stabbed him in the back. His mother's hand had thrown it. Gab gritted his teeth. The tip of the sword was still sticking out of Layroy's body and Gab lowered it like a guillotine. The hairy head was separated from its body before Flora could see anything.

Noemi could heal any injury, but death was irreversible. So to her mother who had stopped practicing this kind of magic a long time ago, Layroy was beyond saving.

Gab turned around. He had troubles breathing. Achille, Socrate and Krissy were charging at him. He parried the first strike at his face by his father's sword. Gab's weapon bounced up high. Socrate hit him inside the elbow while Krissy punched him in the stomach.

The half-demon bent over. From the corner of his eye, he saw his

new and last partner leave him. His sword whirled for a long time before it disappeared, swallowed by the abyss beneath the castle. How could he defeat the elite with his bare hands?

Gab didn't even have to think of another plan. Achille's second sword impaled his sternum and exited through his back. Blood filled his mouth. Would he die too? No, it was not an option! Tom was waiting for him.

His Fae roared. It reached fifty thousand manas. Gab joined his hands and hit Krissy on the top of her skull. She collapsed headfirst and broke her nose against a tile. This concussion should be enough to be rid of one of them. Gab continued his movement by ramming his elbow in Socrate's chest. The blow sent the sexagenarian on the stone floor.

Gab jumped in the air. His stab wound was bleeding profusely, but if he removed the sword, the bleeding would worsen. Towering above the group, the half-demon built up his momentum and created luminous arcs with his claws again. He had to take out as many as he could without killing them.

A halberd appeared in Suling's hands and she used it to easily deflect the attack. One of Dyol's daggers pierced a second wave and dug into Gab's shoulder.

"... Και έτσι μπορώ με την αρχαία σου δύναμη του ανέμου, που ρέει απο τα χέρια της Éole. Δεύτερο στοιχείο, σκίσ' τους σε κομμάτια, Καταιγίδα Ανέμου!" summoned Maxime.

A tiny wind ball surrounded him and dangled him in the air like a puppet. Invisible blades were scraping his skin like paper cuts.

The energy created by Gab's claws reached the magician and his big sister. Maxime's attack caused Gab to crash headfirst on the ground. The impact caused Achille's blade to dig itself deeper of a few centimeters. Gab had to roll on the side right away to dodge Suling's weapon. He leant on the bulwark to stand back up.. His wounds were severe. If Tom didn't dispel that magic soon, he would die. The way things were going, he didn't think he

would make it past five more minutes. Gab had to assess the situation. Socrate and Krissy weren't a threat for now and Maxime and Flora were also out. For one mercenary, being able to handle half of the elite was almost impressive.

Gab finally stood up, but an emerald blade stabbed him right next to Achille's. Aleck had killed his grandson without hesitation. Half a second later, Mack's blade joined the other two. Gab slid down along the wall, staining the stone behind him with a trail of blood. He had hoped for five minutes but he only had a few moments left.

Gab crashed on the ground. Blood was dripping from the corner of his mouth. The liquid fell into the growing red puddle beneath his body. His Fae of Perseverance faded. Achille was towering above him, pitiless.

"Sorry, Tom. I'm going to be late…" whispered Gab.

Gab's head rolled on the side and the hand on his thigh fell on the ground.

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In the whole castle, only Tom and Chronexia were still ascending towards the master. Walking through the second to last door, the goddess let go of Tom who cautiously studied his surrounding, despite his dizziness.

Three hundred meters in front of him, an imperial staircase was leading up to the throne room. At each corner of the room were stairs leading to lower levels.

Little did Tom know that two weeks and a half earlier in that same room, his parents and the others' had faced the master on their own before getting mind-controlled.

Chronexia closed the door behind them, joined Tom who had already started to cross the gigantic room, then walked ahead of him. They had to reach the throne room. They promised Misty. Two hundred and fifty meters, two hundred, a hundred, seventy-five meters. Tom was dragging his feet behind the goddess: his energy and confidence were missing. Chronexia

stopped and Tom rammed her back. His vision was blurring. His burnt cheek and the other wounds were screwing with his lachrymal glands.

“What’s going on?” asked Tom.

A man had appeared in front of Chronexia. With his long platinum blond hair, he could have been one of Celeste relative, but Tom had no way to tell. He was wearing a long close-fitting white toga with one black band where the central zipper was. The drawing of a clock was decorating the white side of the cloth.

“Are you the master?” asked Tom with a weak voice.

Tom was holding his own shoulder. The man gave a disinterested look to the kid who had just called out to him.

“I don’t know what you are talking about…”

“I thought this room was supposed to be empty,” said Tom with the same tone.

“It should have been,” affirmed Chronexia. “How could he change my premonition?”

“My name is Chronos,” cut the intruder “I am the god of time and I’m coming for her.”

Chronos pointed at Chronexia. Tom was completely lost.

“What?” whined Tom, confused.

Chronexia sighed. She didn’t expect such a turn of event.

“Why do you think that the last trial of a god in training is to fight against their other self? There can be only one god for each element. If there is a second one, the world would become unstable or even chaotic and the universe as we know would rip apart. Let’s say that I decide to move the universe’s time forward while at the same time the other god is moving it backward. We would create a temporal breach and everything would vanish in a black hole.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Chronos. “Once someone is born as a god in training, the god of that element is forbidden to access the planet where the

new contestant resides. It will remain that way until the god in training either become a god or dies."

"What happens if the god in training fails a trial? He cannot continue. If they're still alive after failing, is the planet still locked for the other god?" asked Tom.

"If there is already another god in the same domain, yes. It's to avoid interference between the two of them," continued Chronexia. "A god in training who failed cannot die of old age, but their powers, even if they conquer seven seals, won't ever be able to reach further than their own planet delimitation."

"You just have to send another god to kill the god in training. That's what I would do if a new contestant appeared."

"Impossible," explained Chronos. "Unless you're the Boss, it's forbidden for a god to harm a god in training. Only another race can take care of it. Like a human for example. That is also why those trials will never pit the contestant against the gods."

"Oh," said Tom, not very interested. "I think Pyro mentioned something like that. That explains why Misty remained unaware for such a long time."

"You may be the original god of time, but you're six hours late since my certification," taunted the goddess.

"We need six unchanging hours to go through all the details with the Boss in order to avoid any irrecoverable mistake. I'm right on time actually. The fight will take place in this room."

"You're risking your life for the exclusivity? You're a bunch of children," spat Tom.

"No. Except for the last trial, when two gods of a same element fight each other, the winner is promoted to the rank of titan for showing their superiority. In that case, the god of the same element is allowed to exist because, if both are trying to do different things, the power of the titan will

overthrow the one of the god," said Chronos. "Not that it makes any difference for you Chronexia, once you will be deleted."

"Am I in any kind of danger for being with you?" asked Tom. "Not that I care, but before I die, I'd like to take care of that ugly business I've been involved in."

"An invisible veil will protect you and everything else," explained Chronexia. "The fight won't last more than five minutes."

"Alright," shrugged Tom. "Five minutes won't kill me."

Chronexia giggled and Tom continued.

"How do you intend to win? He's more ancient than you therefore more experimented."

"Like Vince was?" she replied. "I know what I'm doing, don't worry about me."

"Enough talk," cut Chronos. "Let's see if you can keep up with me."

Chronos largely opened his arms. The room completely faded. In a fraction of a second, Tom was in space but the gravity didn't change. Chronexia focused like never before. Sweat from her forehead was dripping between her eyes like if someone had thrown a glass of water at her face. She was taking deep breath like if she was exhausted from running after someone.

Chronos sped up the passing of the years really fast. At first, they were in 881 but now fifteen millions years had passed in thirty seconds. Right away, Chronos inverted the flow of time and went backward at the same speed. Tom thought of the situation like if both of them were balancing themselves on a keg. Chronos was steering it and Chronexia was the subject of his whims. If she fell, she would be eliminated. Chronos changed the flux a few times, but the goddess was barely holding on.

"Enough!" she yelled.

Chronexia threw her hands in front of her, trying to go against the flow, in the opposite direction. Time slowed down and finally stopped. The

god of time stood in front of her, highly amused by her exhaustion. Chronexia was shaking and panting. This new recruit would never stand a chance in front of his experience. Tom could see it and even she knew. She had to find another way.

Chronexia had bluffed. She had no strategy to win this fight. She felt exactly like Misty a few hours earlier or rather several millenniums ago. She had to improvise. Her fingers slid on Misty's boomerangs.

Tom's Fae suddenly burst. His hazblades transformed. This fight didn't concern him and he knew that if he stood in their way he would get hurt pretty bad, but…

"Do not touch them!" raged Tom.

"Why?" she asked, offended.

"They're not yours. They're Misty's. I won't let you use them!"

"Tsk," said Chronexia, annoyed.

She bit her thumb. She was about to die and she couldn't let that happen. Since her certification, she didn't have time to practice her control over time. Even if she could accomplish a few things, it didn't mean that she would manage to do them on the first try. She had to find a way. What could she do!?

A trident similar to the one Denver used appeared in Chronos hands and threw it at Chronexia right away, impaling her in the stomach. Her divine blood flew out of her. Tom flinched.

Time stopped then went backward. The blood rushed back into the goddess' body, the weapon exited it, returned to the god's hands and disappeared. Once again, Chronexia's breath stretched into a long complaint. She fell on her knees and spat some pinkish plasma mixed with saliva.

"Looks like I lost," admitted Chronexia.

"Is that all you've got?" asked Chronos, pretending to be sad.

"It seems like it, yes. Tell me, how many seconds does it takes you to pause the usual flow of time?"

“Barely half a second. By now, my brain is used to it. I recognize it as soon as I see it and my brain changes it immediately.”

“Only half a seconds?” asked Chronexia, impressed while coughing some more plasma. “I need two full seconds. You're really out of my league, but... half a second will be more than enough.”

Chronexia lifted her hands in his direction and stopped the flow of time. Like he said, Chronos reached the same dimension five hundred milliseconds later, but Chronexia was already gone.

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Somewhere else in space was a platform made out of stones sealed to one another. On the floating area were the remains of a ruined castle, some never seen before greenery and a few healthy trees. Two identical persons were facing each other.

In her hands, Misty was holding blue boomerangs whose color faded over the years. On the ground at her right was the book that Noemi gave to her the same day. The pages were creased and crumbling, indicating years of intense studies. Misty had to know it by heart now. Her clothes were identical but dirty and teared in multiple places. In front of her, Chronexia was in the same state as when she fought against Chronos.

“What are you doing here?” called Misty with a husky voice.

She hadn’t talked to anybody in years. It was surprising that she still knew how to speak.

“For how long have you been here?” asked Chronexia.

“It’s the end of time, remember? Here, time doesn’t flow. Multiple years,” answered Misty with a voice full of sadness. “Years that I spent training for my revenge...”

“I’m here to give it to you, but I won’t be your opponent. Right now, I’m in the middle of a duel with Chronos, another god able to control time. The winner will become a titan and the other will die.”

“So I guess that if you came to me, it means that you're losing?”

Chronexia nodded once, slowly.

"I want you to take my place in this fight," explained Chronexia. "In return, I will stay here since only one of us can be in the universe at any given time. Still better than dying, right? Also, if you win, you will see Tom again."

"Tom is still alive?" asked Misty, surprised.

Tears started to flow out of her eyes then she started to cry openly. She fell against the stone she walked on so many times.

"In the real world, only six hours passed by since I sent you here. He never stopped looking for a way to bring you back despite all my efforts to dissuade him from it."

Misty kept crying.

"I'm sincerely sorry for locking you up here. It was the only way to keep you alive. Maybe you'll have a hard time believing me, but I really appreciated our time together. You were my friend, my confidante."

"Thank you for coming back," said Misty when her sobbing calmed down.

"So, do you feel ready to take your revenge?" smiled Chronexia. "Try to visit me after you win."

Chronexia tried to mimic Marle's smile and swept her hand at Misty who disappeared in the same starry dust that she appeared with.

Before fading completely, Misty dried her eyes. She cleared her throat and grabbed firmly Tom's last gift to her. She would finally see him again. How old would she be after all these non-existing years? 22 years old? Maybe.

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The time started to flow normally again in the duel. In front of Chronos was standing a young woman with flamboyant pink hair. The strands were tied in pigtails on both sides of her head. In her fingers, she was proudly holding two worn-out blue boomerang. Her face showed determination. Tom looked at her: she was different.

“Misty… Misty? MISTY!”

Chronos created an invisible wall to prevent Tom from approaching.

“Is that really you?” insisted Tom.

Misty turned her head in his direction and gave him a sincere smile. Tom recognized her right away. Big salty tears started to pour from his eyes. She was back. Thank god she was back!

“You look different,” said Chronos. “Who are you?”

“Misty Trachtenberg,” she answered. “I used to be Chronexia’s goddess in training.”

“You should be dead.”

“I came back to finish my assistant’s work.”

Chronos frowned. A goddess in training couldn’t be more powerful than the winner of their own fight. This dirty and stinky kid would not be a menace for a time veteran like himself.

A pink Fae started to surround Misty. Her power rose. Thirty thousand manas, fifty, a hundred, two hundred thousand manas! Tom couldn’t believe it. How did she become so powerful?

“I won’t take too long,” said Misty.

In a second, the years changed and time went back to the 7th day of the 7th month of year 881 at eleven twenty-nine o’clock. Five minutes after the beginning of their fight. Her precision was incredible.

Boomerangs in hands, Misty traced a vertical line like a scissor in front of her, rubbing both blades against each other. A 40 centimeters spark started to crackle on Chronos’ heart, like if the boomerangs had torn the air.

“What are you doing?” asked Chronos.

“I’m eliminating you.”

Sending me to a different era will not change a thing. I will come back right away. I control everything about time!” angrily said Chronos.

“And that’s exactly why you won’t be able to do anything. During six years, I practiced this skill to vanquish the time goddess who locked me up.”

Misty lifted her face toward Chronos. She didn't show the same pity as she did when she was a teenager. This woman was ruthless and she would win.

"I'm creating an inter-temporal zone," she explained. "Between each minutes, there are seconds, between each seconds are milliseconds then microseconds, nanoseconds, picoseconds and femtoseconds. The shortest possible time duration is a light impulse, those are shot out in attoseconds. I'm sending you between two attoseconds. You will disappear from the fourth dimension."

"No! NO!"

Misty opened her arms and the fissure grew bigger. It split Chronos in two and swallowed him completely. Misty crossed her boomerangs again and the fissure and her Fae disappeared just like they appeared. The former goddess in training had just vanquished the master of time. Misty stumbled out of exhaustion.

"You did it!" yelled Tom.

He threw his arms around her neck and almost made her fall. He hugged her as hard as he could to make sure that she wouldn't leave again.

"I was so scared that I may have lost you," he said with a shaking voice.

"Tom…" called Misty.

"Everybody is dead because of me, I couldn't go on, but now you're back and with your powers we will save them all!" said Tom.

"Tom," she insisted.

He let go of her and looked at her. A blue crystal was growing from her feet and was climbing her body, trapping her inside. Now it had reached her knees and was creeping up to her hips.

"What is this?" he panicked.

Misty sighed sadly.

"My technique's side effect. It can destroy someone but it traps me in

a time crystal. I will be frozen in a temporal hourglass."

The crystal swallowed her chest.

"A suicide attack?"

"I didn't know..."

"I will save you!"

"Try to save the others instead. Promise me."

"Yes!" cried Tom. "I will save them, I swear, but don't leave me again!"

The crystal froze Misty's mouth, her nose, her eyes and the tip of her hair. In front of Tom, Misty was standing in a solid translucent block, crystallized.

"Don't move," panicked Tom. "I'll get you out, I swear."

Tom closed his fist and punched the reflecting structure. His hand bounced back with no success. He did it again. In his glove, blood was flowing at the same pace as his tears. Tom grabbed the white hazblade and changed it into a sphere. He wrapped his hand around it and kept on punching the statue.

After multiple hits, a crack started to appear. It grew bigger after each blow. Tom kept going and the crack grew wider.

"Come on! You damned Ixcross! Save her!"

He instinctively hit his shoulder as if to activate the Ixcross by vandalizing it. He built his momentum, held his hazblade as tight as he could and broke the crystal.

A blue dust filled the whole room. Tom's successful smile turned into a horrified expression. The crystal may have exploded, but so did the person trapped by it.

"I...I," stammered Tom. "I killed her."

Tom collapsed, wide-eyed. His friends were dead because of his carelessness and now he had killed the one he loved so much.

"I killed her," he repeated with a flat tone. "I'm the one who killed

her.”

Tom touched his bloody knuckles with his free hand. He studied every wounds. He wasn’t really in a shape to fight anybody. He didn’t have the morale for it either. He had enough. Why did he have to carry this weight all alone? He deserved this eternal sleep as much as the others, but he made a promise. It was his last memory of Misty and he had to honor it now that he had killed her… But after all that, it would be over. He had a hard time believing that in the end, he was yearning for that death the master reserved him. He wanted it more than anything.

Tom stood back up without conviction. His head was hanging backward, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, mouth opened to let out a howl of sadness. He put his foot on the first step and slowly started to climb the stairs while grabbing onto the railing. The 20 steps forming this staircase were all that separated him from his destiny. Each steps reminded him of the people he had failed to protect and save.

So many people had died because of him and somehow, he was still walking. In Mana’s history, he would probably be described as the pathetic hero who tried to save everybody and failed. Heroes couldn't always win, right? Without Misty, there was no victory. If she had never met him, she wouldn’t have met this sad end.

Tom reached the final arch. He walked through it and came up against a door. It was leading to the throne room. Tom leaned his forehead against the cold metal. Each of his wounds made him suffer greatly. He wanted to be done with it as soon as he could.

Tom pushed the doors with all of his weight. The joints rotated and let him in. Exhausted, he lost his balance and stumbled for a few meters until a sharp pain exploded in his left knee. Tom collapsed but didn’t scream. He didn’t have the strength for that. His attacker would have to be satisfied with a weak whine.

In the complete darkness, Tom managed to get on all fours. Only one

ray of light coming from the door he had opened was lighting the spot where he fell. It was exactly like in his dreams.

Blood was violently pumping in his temples. His back was aching, the pain coming from his exploded leg was unbearable and blood coming from his numerous wounds was pooling beneath him. Tom was still crying, his face against the ground. Tears wouldn't stop coming. He didn't even know why he was crying anymore. His friends' death? The pain? His failure? Guilt? Misty? None of it mattered now. If only he could be done with all of this.

In the darkness, a shadow approached, but Tom didn't care. Everybody was counting on him and he had let them down. A loud noise filled the room and a cold voice talked to him.

"Hey Tom, I hope you didn't forget about me…"

Chapter 18:
Judgment and Justice

Tom was panting on all fours. The master was laughing in the nocturnal room, but it was the least of his worries. Tom hadn't been able to protect his friends. He couldn't save his parents. He couldn't even be a coward and save himself. The only thing he desired was death. The shameful feeling he experienced during his dreams was nothing compared to the one he felt right now. The reality was far worse than the simple dreams that haunted him. He wanted to join his friends. Those who once loved him, encouraged him, trusted him. But he had let them down. Death was the only thing he deserved. He didn't care about anything anymore.

Footsteps were approaching Tom. Somebody was standing straight in front of him. Tom had a hard time moving his head. To look at this person would be way too demanding for his body.

So this was that person that wanted to hurt him so much. The one that had proclaimed themselves the master and who was haunting his dreams for about 40 days now. Why try so hard? Why devise such a complex plan simply to kill him?

"Can you recognize my voice?" asked the master.

Unconsciously, Tom thought about it. Yes, he knew that voice. It was a girl he had heard often. Maybe one of his travel companion. Marle? No she never talked so he couldn't recognize the voice, he must have heard it before. That was simple logic. Tom felt relieved to know she was innocent.

Who then? Asuka? No, impossible. Her gentleness would prevent her from managing this type of situation. And he saw her fall in the lava. Not even history's most powerful villain could survive such heat, even for a

second. Noemi or Misty?

He had to be honest with himself. Noemi didn't look like a murderer. She had toughen up during their travels and she had became an unparalleled healer but if she was the master, Tom would eat his Ixcross.

The only one left was Misty. No. Tom refused to believe it. He had just killed her with his own hands and she loved him, right? Was all the things they experienced together just for show? She would have manipulated him for years just to kill him. Is that why she got closer to him and avoided all the other boys?

"Alright, I'll spare you the trouble of figuring it out."

Sound produced by a cape indicated movement. Tom forced himself to lift his head. He had to know. The master's fingers grabbed the hood and pulled it down. On each side of her head, pink pigtails bounced. Tom's heart sank with acute pain. Those emerald eyes only belonged to one girl.

"Misty?" squealed Tom.

The corner of her lips rose into a sadistic smile. Tom couldn't believe it. After all these years she had made a fool out of him. Tom didn't have any reasons to stay alive anymore. Her parent's murder and using Tom to help her become a goddess. She was the only one not to have a room dedicated to her death. She had planned everything.

"Why?" asked Tom. "Why do you want to kill me?"

She burst out laughing and pulled her hood back up to hide her face.

"Who is this Boss?"

"He is the supreme god. There are four divinity ranks: gods in training, gods, titans and the Boss. He is the universe's Supreme Being. Tell me, Tom. Do you know why were are in the year 881? This planet is several millennias old. So what could have happened during year 0 to cause the start of a new era?"

"I don't know," said Tom, uninterested. "You know I never listened during Flora's history classes."

"You see, during the year 0, a titan controlling dimensions rebelled against the Boss' power. Unable to vanquish him, she stole weapons he had invented and hid them in different dimensions but mostly on Mana. The Boss had to get those weapons back because their power would cause chaos. The thing is, when he created human beings, he gave them free will. So when one of them got a hold of one of those divine weapons, he couldn't take it back while its owner was still alive."

"God lost his items," summarized Tom. "How has that anything to do with me?"

"I'm getting there," said Misty. "But for the remaining of my story, I can't keep pretending to be Misty any longer."

"You're not Misty?" wondered Tom, relieved.

"Nah, not at all. I only wanted to see your reaction. It was precious. But you shouldn't feel relieved just yet. After all, I still spent the last month in your company without you noticing."

A big weight lifted off his shoulders, but the feeling didn't last. Someone in his team had played him and had killed every single one of his friends. Tom had to know. Ryu killed by a dragon? Marle passing away because of her broken mace? Noemi squished by a pillar? Nark and Asuka drowned and Gab's disappearance? One of them wasn't real, but which one? The only deaths Tom hadn't witnessed with his own eyes were Ryu's and Gab's, but could they play him like that? All those questions were in vain anyway, Tom didn't have the strength to fight his destiny anymore.

"My real name is Cameron Price. I was a god in training like Misty, yet I failed my seventh trial. I kept my god in training title, but I wasn't allowed to try the failed trial again. So I searched for an alternative. The Boss granted me an audience and we made a deal. If I could retrieve the lost weapons, he would create a 'prophecy' in a human's body that would state the following:

Justice will be served when the murderer will kill the child prodigy

on the future sacred ground of judgment. Thus the murderer's wish will be fulfilled."

"I am the child prodigy?" asked Tom.

"You are the person mentioned in this divine sentence," corrected Cameron. "I brought back the last divine weapon, that wasn't in free will territory, to the Boss on the 1st day of the 4th month of the year 864."

"The day I was born" noted Tom. "I was chosen to be the child prodigy because I was the only Manian born this day?"

Under his cape, Cameron sighed and nodded.

"It took me two years to access Arenight's records and to learn the child's identity. The only result that came out was the son of the legendary heroes Achille and Dyol, members of the elite. So I sent my chief general, Layroy, to kidnap the said Tommy Watson, son of the elite. Thinking he was an only child, I didn't specify that he was two years old. So when Layroy brought me your brother back, I had little interest with him. So I gave him to Layroy as a test subject."

"You didn't come back to take me?"

"Achille tried to find his son for the last 15 years, all in vain. But the security surrounding you greatly increased. Aleck and Flora moved to Tamber. Half of the elite wasn't a force I could mess with back in the days. I needed to find the sacred ground anyway, and I searched a long time before I found this castle."

"Really?" said Tom, falsely interested.

"This place is the ninth seal. It's not controlled by a god so years ago, I took over it using my powers to hide it from the Manians eyes. More recently, I wrote a letter to Flora to incite her to move…"

"Powers?" asked Tom. "That's right! You must have your own element."

"Yes. When I kill you, I will become the god of destiny! I will be able to control every human life in this universe. I could take control over the elite

or my generals thanks to the powers I already unlocked. I can create illusions from scratch, build situations, but the people's mental strength is what's preventing me from altering destiny itself. The weaker someone is psychologically, the stronger my control over them is. That's what made you believe I was Misty a few minutes ago, but you are in a sorry state so it was really easy. At first I wasn't able to do it, so I guided you."

Cameron turned his back to Tom and walked forward without going too far. He kept on explaining.

"I recreated an illusion of Vince on a pristine human body by using your parent's memories. Then you focused on him and his persona built itself back on its own, but the original Vince really died 25 years ago."

Tom exhaled. It was a lot of information to take in. If he understood correctly, this Cameron Price had to kill him to become a legitimate god, because he made a deal with the Supreme Being. He was just a pawn in all that story and all of his friends had died for his whims. All but one. Tom had to know who it was.

"Who did you impersonate? Come on, surprise me," he said with a tone more casual than he'd thought.

The master got near Tom. He crouched in front of him, at the same level as his face, and lowered his hood again. This time, there wasn't any pink strand of hair. Their flamboyant color had turned to brown. They were shorter. In front of him was Nark, Socrate's student. He was behind all of this.

"Hey, Tom."

A sudden rage took control of Tom, but the lack of strength prevented him from moving. Inexplicably, the compassion he felt toward him during the past month had turned into hatred. In his subconscious, this rage was coming from all the blame he was carrying on his shoulders.

"You drowned!"

He wanted to jump at his throat, but energy was drained out of his

body.

“Yes but to destroy your mental strength, I had to kill your companions. I'm a skilled fighter, but six against one would have been impossible, even for me. So, by eliminating your friends with my traps, I was making sure that you would move forward while becoming weaker psychologically. I had to make sure that you wouldn’t attempt anything against me.”

“Ryu loved his dragons so much,” he continued. “So I found one to his tastes. I saw how much Marle hated Denver, so I placed him in the second room and I ordered him to destroy her mace. I also made sure that you wouldn’t interfere. I had that mechanical spider in store for Noemi, but when we got there this woman had destroyed it. Whatever, the result was to my liking. It’s in the next room that things got complicated.”

“When I wanted to sacrifice myself,” remembered Tom, sadly.

“I couldn’t let you kill yourself so close to my goal. So I took the risk to enter while you had your back turned. I know very well how to teleport myself like Noemi, but I couldn’t do it in front of you. That’s why I urged you to leave. I still had two more deaths planned: one for Asuka and her vertigo and one for Gab with his desire for vengeance against Layroy. I’m lucky he only caught a glimpse of my face once when he was younger. He could have exposed me, but memories are a vague thing, aren’t they? It does explain his aversion for me though, ha, ha, ha.”

“You didn’t have anything for Misty?”

“Chronexia?” he corrected. “No, since we made sure that she’d become a goddess, right?” said Nark with a wink. “I know without a doubt that gods are not allowed to harm the ones in training. Although I’m ecstatic to see that she’s not here. It’s nice of you to have taken care of her for me.”

“I hate you,” whispered Tom. “So many people died because of you.”

“No, Tom. They died because of YOU,” he specified. “And you’re next. I have to say that I was very scared in the Ice catacombs when you

almost died. But it all turned around when I asked Frost to send us to my generals. It was an attempt to speed things up. It didn't go exactly as I planned, but it explained why I was in possession of Vince's sword. Each parts of this premonition fell in place on its own."

Cameron shrugged and unsheathed the serrated weapon Tom saw so often in his dreams. The child prodigy only had one more question to ask.

"Why tell me all this just before killing me? I couldn't care less and it's absurdly cliché."

"Personal satisfaction, Tom. I've been trying to become a god for two centuries. I'd like at least one person to recognize my efforts, even if that person is you. Although, if you really want it that bad, I will put an end to your suffering. It's nothing personal Tom, it's simply… divinities…"

Cameron approached him and looked at his serrated sword. The key to unlock his long awaited prize. In front of him, Tom was on all four, completely still. His strength still hadn't come back. His back muscles were sore. His cheek was burning intensely. His open knee was spreading blood on the stone. Nark was the final nail in his coffin.

With no hesitation, the master stuck his sword into Tom's heart and pierced it for a long time. The blade hit the floor and dug itself between two stone, balancing Tom while he was drained of his life. His arms went numb, they couldn't hold his weight anymore. It was completely carried by the silver serrated blade caught in his rib cage.

"You suck," taunted Tom. "Misty was able to get it in less than a month…"

It was ridiculous but it was the last thing he thought of telling him. The insult still caused the master to frown. Whatever, he had achieved his goal. A smile stretched on his lips and he let out a nervous laugh. After two long centuries, he had done it!

He stepped back to examine Tom in his entirety, dying. Only a few more seconds until his last breath. Three…

"*Misty,*" thought Tom.

Two. Nark was getting excited by his countdown.

"*Oh yes,*" remembered Tom, slowly. "*I promised her… that I'd save the others.*"

One! Tom coughed a spray of blood. He wouldn't get far with a sword impaled in his chest.

"*It would be nice… if I kept, my promises, made to the others… and to…*"

ZERO! That was it. Tom was no longer alive. He had concluded his deal with the Boss and Tom had reached the limit of his lifespan. He had exceeded it.

"……*Misty…*"

This smell… Tom knew it.

"Is there a problem, Princess?"

This voice? Tom recognized it.

A hand grabbed the sword's hilt and removed it from his back with a swift movement. Tom collapsed on the floor. Someone crouched next to him on his right. They delicately placed their fingers on his back. His wounds resorbed immediately. His knotted muscles relaxed, his burnt cheek was rebuilt and his knee regained its usual appearance. His cells were healing but his mental exhaustion was still present.

"It was pretty close," noted a feminine voice. "But I succeeded, Tom will live. God i'm good."

"Defense emblem," invoked a third person. "Card of light."

A translucent dome surrounded Tom and lit the whole room. Three new persons had entered the room. Tom looked around him. Gab was in front of him, Nark's sword in his hand. On his right, Misty had healed him. In a split second, she had rewound his body's time six hours ago, right before they entered the Light altar. On his left, Asuka had summoned an invisible shield to prevent the master from getting closer. This precaution was useless:

Cameron was frozen in place, completely petrified out of perplexity.

“How! You're all dead!” raged the master.

“Defense emblem,” repeated Asuka. “In Arenight’s Coliseum, I used my card of defense at the last second, but the impacted tore it. Gab got it back and got it improved by a blacksmith. He gave it back to me after Marle’s death. The emblem activated itself when I fell into the lava. A veil was protecting me. I swam to the shore and wandered in the underground tunnels before I found some stairs leading to the back room.”

Nark’s glare landed on Gab. He saw him being impaled by multiple swords. How could he be standing in front of him? Feeling questioned, Gab explained.

“While fighting against the elite, I lost my sword. Without my weapon, I cannot control my demonic side that your late general injected me with. In my demon form, I am a lot stronger and way more resilient. Three thorns would not be enough to kill me.”

“And you didn’t kill the elite members!”

“When a beast is wounded and in danger, it flees to heal. That’s what I did. I couldn’t miss your ball. Once safe, I reverted back to my human shape.”

“What about you?” asked Nark to Misty, offended.

“I fought against the god of time, Chronos, and won. I became a titan. My skill trapped me, but Tom freed me by killing me. During the end of times, I accumulated six years worth of energy to create only one temporal save for when I die. I didn’t think I would use it so soon, but that will do.”

“Ha,ha!” laughed Nark. “Hahahahahaha! It doesn’t change anything!

Anything at all! Titan or not, you cannot harm a god in training because of the hierarchy. Maybe Gab survived his wounds but he’s in no state to fight an experienced swordsman. And let’s be honest, Asuka isn’t even worth mentioning!”

Nark wasn’t wrong. Gab had sealed his wound but an abrupt

movement would reopen them and he couldn't count on his uncontrollable demon, even with Vince's sword in his hands. This blade wasn't made for him. It was as good as not having one: he would turn into a demon at the first sign of danger and attack everything that moved.

Asuka used magic, but with his destiny and prediction powers, Nark would avoid her spells with his eyes closed. Finally, if Misty attacked, she would have to face the Boss' Counsel. Despite all the horrors he inflicted them, there was no valid reason for her to attack him. She was hierarchically higher than a god in training.

Nobody could do anything against Nark. He would eradicate them and obtain his title. That would only lengthen the process. It was just a detour.

"I'll face him," said Tom.

He put one knee on the ground, then a foot. He slowly lifted himself on his legs. Nark's laugh grew louder.

"You think you can win against a god in training?"

"I had the will to win against a real god. You're just a stepping stone."

"My bodyguards will be here in a second," warned Nark.

"The elite's on its way," confirmed Misty. "They should be here in a few minutes."

"You have no chance to win! NONE!" said the master.

"We'll take care of the elite," said Gab. "Will you be alright, Tom?"

Tom landed his hands on his hazblades. He was staring at the floor. His energy was coming back along with his hope. Misty had survived. He didn't kill her. Gab and Asuka were alright. If they could survive, why not Noemi, Ryu and Marle? He could still save everybody. Misty was back to normal and she was now a titan. Everything would be alright.

Will was flowing through his veins. Tom lifted his head slowly until he was about to meet Nark's eyes, then he straightened it abruptly. All the rage he felt reflected on his face. Tom hated him. His Fae burst out suddenly.

Determination was beating in his heart. He would pay. Twenty thousand, thirty, forty, fifty thousand manas.

Tom threw his two hazblades still in their ball shape in the air. The green spheres crossed path and changed shape. Tom jumped, caught their hilts and landed by dropping one knee on the floor, arms stretched away from his body.

Nark crossed his fingers between his hands and an energy sphere started to swell. Tom wanted to pick a fight? He would eliminate him! He would obliterate him! When he threw his hands in front of him, the energy rushed toward Tom who charged headfirst. With his hazblades, Tom cut the energy ball. The particles scratched his face.

Nark's techniques were completely different. On the way to Domino, when Tom had cut the exact same attack, it had been divided in two. Now, his energy spheres were exploding to his face like paint balls. Pure plasma was dangerous, but not deadly in low concentration. Although, if Nark shot him in close range, he would suffer the same fate as Johnson in Hyrtol.

"Aside from Marle, nobody saw my true strength," said Nark. "Your fifty thousand manas are only half of my power. I can see all your moves by reading your mind. You can't do anything against me."

Tom didn't stop. When he was in range, he sliced Nark vertically, but the latter jumped high in the air. His jumps were as exaggerated as Tom's. He had to use his plasma since he didn't have an Ixcross like Tom, but the result was the same. Right above the swordsman, Nark put his hands on the side of his own ribs then threw them beneath him. An energy ray rushed toward Tom who plunged to his right and rolled on the floor. Nark landed in front of him. When Tom stood up, the master hit him on his left cheek with his fist, sending him in the opposite direction.

Tom bounced and stuck his hazblade in the ground to stop himself from sliding. He stood back up immediately. His aura was still growing. His will was beating with every breath he took.

“I can foretell your thoughts,” explained Nark. “I know what you're about to do the second you think about it.”

“Thinking have never been my strong point,” admitted Tom. “Judgment and Justice act on their own.”

“Who?”

“That my hazblades names. Judgment,” Tom lifted the forest green blade, “and Justice,” he then presented the lighter one. “They’re the one who will decide of your fate.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Nark, frowning.

The master pointed his palm at Gab. The serrated sword he was still holding flew out of his hands. It floated and spun toward Nark until he caught it. An orange Fae of a hundred thousand manas was making the air in the room swirl. With his eighty thousand manas, Tom could still compete with him.

Tom charged him with Justice and hit the serrated sword with it. His hazblade bounced back. With such a powerful Fae, each of Nark’s blows weighted a ton. Tom’s aura wouldn’t be enough. He had to increase it.
Nark spun on himself. The serrated sword found his way into Tom’s flank. Blood flowed: the cut was deep.

“Your justice isn’t worth anything in my world.” taunted Nark.

Tom stood back up. This wound would cripple him for the remaining of their fight. How could he foil him? Anything he would think about, Nark would see it. He had to stop thinking entirely. No… Exactly!

Tom grabbed the hazblade he had let go and charged at Nark.

“A diagonal slash,” thought Tom.

Nark placed his sword horizontally and pushed back Tom’s.

“Use your strength, turn then hit on the left,” continued Tom.

Tom did it mechanically. The serrated sword blocked his way once again.

“He’s open on his right!”

The master pushed back Judgment and was about to block Justice on the right, but his impulse was lost in emptiness. Tom's Fae pulsated with twenty thousand additional manas. They were now equals. With all of his might, Tom sliced Cameron's chest from the bottom up.

The master's cape tore and Nark flew into a wall at the back of the room. The stone shook under the impact. Misty and Asuka let out an excited shout but their enthusiasm didn't last. Nark, annoyed, stood back up and tore the remains of his black cape. Underneath was an outfit that was slowly stained by his half-god blood.

"As long as I didn't reach the point of no return, even if I firmly decide to go left, I can still go right. Destiny doesn't exist," said Tom. "It's only choices that we make. You will never be able to anticipate them, you can only see one of the outcomes."

"I got careless for a second," recovered Nark.

He snapped his fingers. In the room, energy spheres started to grow in different places.

"What's that?" asked Asuka.

"The mana in the air," explained Misty while frowning. "Nark can control it?"

Nark threw his hand in front of himself and clenched it in a fist. The energy spheres rushed towards Tom like homing missiles. They exploded on contact. Tom covered his face instinctively. The concentration was still too low to kill him, but it could seriously wound him.

When the attack stopped, Tom stumbled. In some places, a gray smoke was emanating from his burnt clothes. Tom fell on his back. His Fae weakened more and more. His hazblades slipped on the floor.

"Tom!" panicked the others.

"It's over, Tom," announced the master. "My elite will be there in a moment. Say goodbye to your precious Misty, this time, you won't see her again."

The back door from the room where Misty fought Chronos opened violently. The group of nine fighters entered and started to run across the hall.

“Card of Earth!” invoked Asuka.

Multiple stalactites appeared on the room’s ceiling. They cracked at their base and fell toward the older fighters.

Socrate avoided the first one by taking a right turn and Suling mimicked him. She rolled on the floor and started to run again without any loss of speed. Achille and Aleck jumped and deflected the rocks with their fists. Since Gab had escaped with their weapons, that’s all they had left to protect themselves. However, it didn’t prevent them from moving forward.

“...Έτσι καλώ το δαιμονικό σου χείμαρο, που ρέει από την ανάσα της Aqua. Αυτό το κύμα ας μας ανόιξει ενα μονοπάτι στη δικαιοσύνη. Τρίτο στοιχείο, Πλημμύρα Νερού !”

Running water appeared above the runners. It was floating between the falling stalactites and the elite. Maxime’s invocation had made Asuka’s attack completely useless. The group was closing in fast.

“Temporal stop!” commanded Misty.

The team froze instantly. The flood created by Maxime fell on the floor and drained through two gigantic whirlpool located on the stairs at both ends of the room.

“I can hold them back for two minutes!” explained Misty. “I still haven’t regained my strength since my fight with Chronos and my regeneration.”

Gab and Asuka turned around to watch Tom’s fight. Nark was closer now. Apart from a few pillars here and there holding the ceiling, there was nothing between a still collapsed Tom and his future murderer. This fight had lasted long enough.

Nark lifted his serrated sword and aimed at Tom’s heart for the second time. He gave a sharp thrust, but Tom’s Fae burst out to a hundred

and ten thousand manas. He grabbed his white hazblade and deflected the blow. With his foot, Tom kicked the master's bleeding wound. Leaning on his hands, Tom propelled himself on his feet. He bent toward Nark and punched him under the jaw with his armed fist. Cameron was lifted by the blow and fell on his back.

"Asuka! Gab!" called Tom.

Tom started to run toward one of the pillars. He landed his foot on the base and climbed it as much as his built up speed would allow him.

"Card of… attack!" stammered Asuka.

Taken by surprise, Asuka didn't know what to do. So she summoned the first card she picked. From the piece of paper, a gigantic two meters sword emerged. It was identical to the shape the hazblade took when Misty grabbed it during Pyro's trial. The only issue was its weight. It was way too heavy to be handled by the summoner. It took her by surprise and she wouldn't be able to help Tom…

Gab grabbed the gigantic weapon's hilt. He spun on himself to build momentum and aimed at Tom. He threw it with all his might.

Tom rotated to hang above Nark. While doing so, he threw his dark green hazblade who shone with its very own dark aura.

"My Judgment…" began Tom.

The sword buried itself in Nark's forearm and pinned him to the floor. The master let out a painful scream. Tom continued his move and slung his white hazblade.

"…my Justice…"

Like the black one, the light green hazblade, surrounded by a white aura, buried itself in the master's other forearm. Nark couldn't run away. He could only see his own destiny slowly coming to an end.

Tom grabbed the hilt of the weapon Gab threw at him. Tom rolled over in the air, placing the blade beneath him. He was falling on Nark at great speed and he stuck the giant sword's tip directly in his heart.

"... and my will!"

Tom landed on Nark, a foot against his throat to muffle a protesting shout.

"... are absolute," finished Tom.

Blood pooled on the floor. Nark died slowly. Tom didn't look at him again. He didn't want to see his sad traitorous face anymore. He caught the giant sword's guard and spun it 180 degrees.

"Good bye, Nark."

Tom let go of the sword and fell on his back. His Fae was evaporating with every exhalation. Gab caught him before he hit the floor.

"Tom won!" cheered Asuka.

Misty gave an interested look in their direction. Nark was laying on the floor, lifeless, and Tom was slowly being drained of his. Misty let go of her spell and rushed to his side again. This time, she only had to bring his body back a few minutes so it was easy and almost instantaneous. Once she was done, she hugged him.

"You did it, Tom!" she praised him. "I adore you!"

With no warning, she kissed him. Dumbfounded, Gab looked at Asuka. She returned his gaze and shrugged, embarrassed.

"Tom?" called a voice.

Achille's voice came from the doorway. He entered the room, overrun right away by his spouse who threw herself at her son. Suling did the same with her older daughter while the remaining of the elite approached.

"Where is Noemi?" was Flora's first question.

Mack asked the same question about Ryu.

"I couldn't protect them," said Tom, guilty.

An overwhelming silence fell on the room.

"Misty, could you..." began Tom

He was interrupted by the titan who shook her head. With the most compassionate tone she could, she said:

“I cannot bring people back to life. Everybody dies one day or another. Some people lifespan are longer than others. Noemi was my best friend. If I could bring her back, I would already be working on it.”

Another silence fell. Sadness started to overtake the group.

“How can we leave this place?” asked Asuka sadly. “I want to go home.”

“I can teleport us outside,” explained Misty. “Is there a destination you would like?”

Mack cleared his throat to hide a sob that he refused to share.

“Secretia” he said. “Ryu’s blackbird must be back, you will be able to use it one after the other to go back home. It will also be the best place to talk.”

Nobody objected. They all wanted to go home. This whole story had been appalling and it wasn’t over yet. How could they break it to Achille and Dyol that Gab was their long lost son? Tom chose to not think about it for the time being. After all, it wasn’t really concerning him, Gab could take care of it.

Without waiting any further, Misty regrouped the elite and their family and they left the castle in a cloud of stardust.

Standing back on the balcony, two figures who watched everything unfold shared a devilish smile.

“I told you so. Come on, let’s go. This world won’t be conquered on its own,” said a male voice.

“Yes I know,” said the woman, annoyed. “I hope we'll meet this bunch again…”

The woman didn’t get to finish her sentence, they had already vanished.

***

Tom and everyone else appeared in front of Secretia’s main house at one thirty in the morning. Mack and Suling offered them to get some rest,

they could talk later. Everybody went to bed except for Misty. She asked Tom if they could talk alone.

They walked under the starry sky and stopped in a plain a bit further away from the town.

“What would you say if I left for a while?”

“I would be rather insulted, Misty,” said Tom. “Why? Where do you have to go?”

“To the end of times,” explained Misty. “I promised Chronexia I would visit her after I beat Chronos. I did it two hours ago, so it’s been about two years for her.”

“She’s so selfish. What do you owe her?”

“Well, life, to begin with. But she’s also the only family I have left.”

“You have me,” replied Tom.

“And that’s why I want to come back. I'll be quick, I promise!”

Misty crossed her hands as she pleaded and pouted adorably. Tom had never been able to refuse her anything. He couldn’t start now. Anyway, she always did as she pleased so if he said no, she would probably go behind his back.

Tom hugged her then he took her face in his hands and kissed her. He gave her all the love he had kept for himself during the past 10 years.

“I will wait for you. Always.”

“You’re dramatizing,” she laughed. “See you later. I’ll be back in a bit, I promise!”

She giggled like a child and disappeared into her usual shimmering dust.

***

Misty reappeared on the same eternal platform that she stepped on during six years. Chronexia was meditating under one of the rare trees.

“Sorry for making you wait,” pleaded Misty.

Chronexia saw her. She stood up and took her in her arms.

“You’re late,” the goddess blamed her. “I was starting to think you had lost. Come on, let’s leave this place.”

“And how do you intend on doing so? There can’t be two time goddesses at the same time, remember?”

“I’m the only one,” said Chronexia, puzzled. “You're a titan now, right? Sure I'll mostly have to share your body though, but I’m already used to it so don’t worry about that.”

“Wait!” opposed Misty.

Chronexia reentered her body. Misty sighed. It was useless, she had already housed herself in a part of her mind. Whatever, she had to go back to Tom. When did she leave him? Oh, right. The 8th day of the 7th month from the year 881. Going back to that day would be a piece of cake…

“Oops!” said Chronexia, feigning innocence.

***

Misty appeared in a great plain south of Arenight. Most of it was on fire. In the distance, an army of crawling demons was surrounding her. They were closing in fast. In the sky, two persons were floating. The distance between them prevented Misty from recognizing them.

A 16 year old girl with silver hair and a 20 years old knight joined Misty.

“Oh my head!” moaned Misty. “Chronexia, don't mess with my power or I’m sending you back to the end of times.”

“Calm down Misty,” answered her own voice. “I only wanted to see what Mana would look like in the future. I won’t do it again, but you got to admit that it doesn’t seem so good.”

“Are you alright?” coldly asked the teenager.

“Yes,” replied Misty. “What year is this?”

The teenager looked at the knight and hesitated. She finally answered.

“We are in 898. Sorry, but who are you?””

“My name's Misty. I'm the one who controls time.

“Right, I already heard about you from my parents before they passed away.”

Misty stood back up and dusted her shorts and camisole.

“What’s your name?”

“My name's Lizzie Watson, daughter of Gab Watson and Asuka Starz. We're some of the few survivors on Mana.”

Lizzie pointed at herself and the knight. She was obviously avoiding the two persons in the sky, but Misty couldn’t afford to study them. The army was only a few seconds away from them.

“Not for long if you stay here,” replied Misty. “I can take you ten years in the past.”

“No thanks,” declined Lizzie. “My place is here.”

“Take her and go!” ordered the knight. “Find a way to change the past!”

Misty grabbed Lizzie by the shoulders and threw her on the ground. The knight had unsheathed a three meters long sword and spun it above the girls to protect them from the attacking monsters. The ground opened under them and Misty fell with the teenager.

“No!” yelled Lizzie. “Dive!”

“I’m sorry Tom,” thought Misty. “I might be a bit late. I'll leave a note in your backpack before we head out to save your parents and chase after Vince. I hope you read it…”

Misty left for the year 887 while tears fell in the flow of time.

To be continued...

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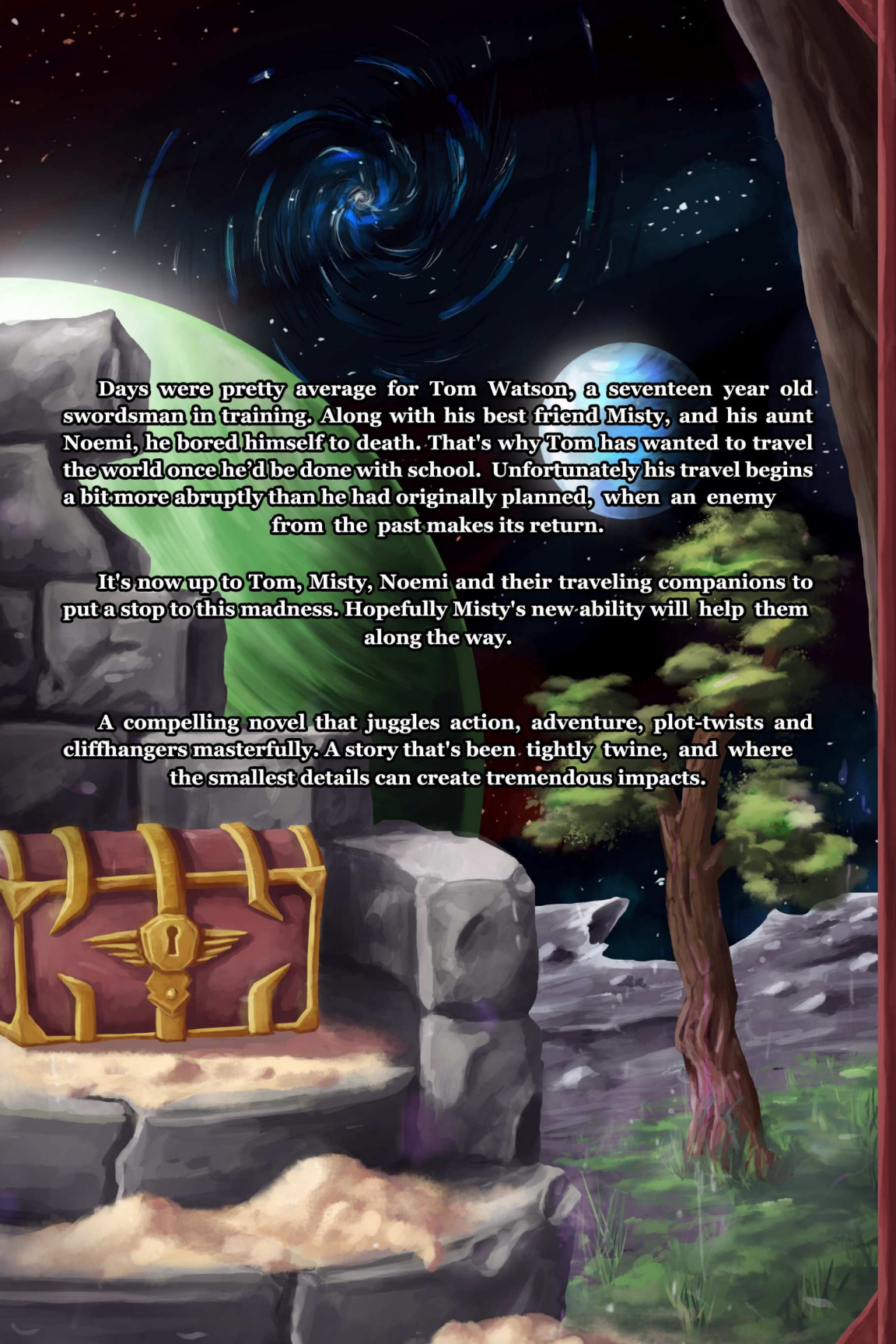

Days were pretty average for Tom Watson, a seventeen year old swordsman in training. Along with his best friend Misty, and his aunt Noemi, he bored himself to death. That's why Tom has wanted to travel the world once he'd be done with school. Unfortunately his travel begins a bit more abruptly than he had originally planned, when an enemy from the past makes its return.

It's now up to Tom, Misty, Noemi and their traveling companions to put a stop to this madness. Hopefully Misty's new ability will help them along the way.

A compelling novel that juggles action, adventure, plot-twists and cliffhangers masterfully. A story that's been tightly twine, and where the smallest details can create tremendous impacts.